

[E]motions, Moments, and Transnational Connections:

The Lived Experiences of Two Labour Migrants in  
Canada's Seasonal Agricultural Workers' Program

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## **ABSTRACT**

### **[E]motions, Moments, and Transnational Connections: The Lived Experiences of Two Labour Migrants in Canada's Seasonal Agricultural Workers' Program**

Nelson Ferguson

Labour migrants have been routinely categorised within social scientific thought as either abstracted economic entities or as victims of global processes beyond their understanding. A striking majority of attempts to understand processes of migration, especially in regards to “unskilled” Mexican migrant workers, have been informed primarily by macro-level economic approaches, while the social and individual factors at play have been largely pushed to the side. As such, the social lives and individual diversities of these migrants have received meagre academic attention.

In acknowledgment of this gap, this current thesis focuses on the lived experiences of Hector-Alberto and Durango, two individuals engaged in a cycle of migration as participants in Canada’s managed migration program, the Seasonal Agricultural Workers’ Program. Through an ethnographic description of the everyday experiences of Hector and Durango, three relevant themes are explored: their individual relations to their work, their family, and their co-workers. As such, the present work aims to explore the varied experiences of migration and frame labour migrants as significant social actors rather than abstracted units or victims of social forces.

The author encourages an engagement in a broader investigation of the “migrant experience”; to look beyond the idea of transnational migration as simply physical movements across national boundaries, but rather as groupings of processes with profound and diverse meanings to those involved. Perhaps such a perspective would play a role in revealing the complex myriad of interacting processes which combine under the umbrella term of “migration”.

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## **Prologue: An Introduction to our Protagonists**

[W]e have asserted that what is worth studying is human experience; not economic experience, not psychological experience, not religious experience, cut into segments and studied separately, but human experience understood as the experience of life. This I believe to be an assertion of freedom against slavery. For each segmentary model of man is also a straightjacket for men. (Wolf 1974: 96)

### **Prologue Part 1: A Drink with Hector**

Hector-Alberto finishes pouring his fourth cream into his coffee. Around the paper cup lie the remnants of six empty sugar packs. He notices me glancing at the crumpled packets.

“I have a small problem with the sugar,” he tells me with a broad smile, in his accented English, “I like the sweet stuff too much!”

The hustle and noise of the Mexico City airport surrounds us. We sit across from each other at a small table on the second floor, near the rail overlooking Gate B. A short month ago Hector had walked through those gates, returning home after his eight month sojourn in Canada, his eight month contract on a Southern Ontario decorative tree farm as a migrant labourer in the Seasonal Agricultural Workers’ Program.

But now it is my turn to leave, the end of a fieldwork project spread out over six months is at hand. I had spent my last few days with Hector and his family, and Hector had offered to accompany me to the airport. That morning, his wife and children expressed that they were sad to see me go - he and his family had been hospitable beyond

my greatest expectations during my stay. (But I had my suspicions that they were also happy to have their Canadian sleep-over guest off of their living room floor).

Hector and I had arrived to the airport early in the morning, and after waiting in the long line and finally checking in my back-pack, we found that we have an extra hour before my plane's departure, enough time to share a coffee and a conversation in the airport's food-court.

Hector carefully sips his steaming, sugar-laden coffee, filled to the brim after his additions, while his eyes scan my face.

"Next time you come to Mexico City, you should do the laser eye surgery. Then you won't need these anymore," as he reaches across the table and taps the frames of my glasses, which are still on my face.

"You think so?"

"Yes. Yes. It's more cheap than in Canada, and only take less than one hour. My wife will get it, once her eyes is...are...um, *estabilizado*?"

"Stabilised", I correct him – as part of the friendly contract we developed over the summer while working together at Groesbeck Farms, he has agreed to help me in my fieldwork research while I help him practise his already near-fluent English.

"Yes. Stabilised."

I tell him I'm not sure about such an operation and that I don't mind my glasses so much. He proceeds to inform me how the surgery process works, in an attempt to quell any worries I may have.

As we drink our coffee, we eventually get onto the topic of Hector's plans for the near future.



“I need work for the next three months. Maybe I try to have a job here, at the airport. I want something where I can practice my English. I need practice my English!”

“I think you’re doing really good so far.” Although he was fluent before coming to Canada, his accent and ease with words had improved drastically over the summer. Hector’s hard work, dedication, and interest in learning English have been evident and he has made an amazing amount of progress in the six months since I’ve met him. I still feel odd twinges of jealousy, wishing my passable Spanish had progressed as quickly as his mastery of his second language.

“What about the ad we saw in the metro,” I ask, “the one for the call centre. Will you try to get a job there?”

“Yes. It’s a support line, for computer questions. I write the phone number... They want people who speak Spanish and English, so I will try... I’ll wait two weeks, have *Navidad*, the Christmas, with my family. Then, I will call.”

We pause, and take sips of our respective coffees.

“And then... When are you going to know if you’re going back to Groesbeck’s?” Hector lets out a sigh, thinking for a moment. “Um, *Febrero*. Near the start of February. My plan, if I work here 3 months, then I go back in March.”

“Good, that’s good. What about the other guys, the other new guys, do you think they’ll go back?”

“Yes, well. Leobardo and the others, they are not happy with the contract. It’s too long for them... Augusto, he thought it was hard, but he might come back. Leobardo, he tell Hans, *el patron*, straight that he can’t be away from his family for so long.”

“Yeah, well, it’s eight months. I can understand...And, well, what about the others? You know about Julio, or old Jose?”

“Oh, I don’t know. But Manual, he wants to change farms.”

“Manual? Which one?”

“Young Manual.”

“Young Manual? But he’s been there for three years now. I thought he liked it...”

“No, no”, Hector says somewhat unconcerned while scratching his chin, “He doesn’t like some workers. Especially Durango. He says he’s very *rudo* to him.

“Really? But, Durango’s like that with everyone. That’s just his sense of humour.”

Hector shrugs, admitting that he doesn’t completely understand Manual’s motives. We both take a moment to sip at our coffees.

I change topics slightly. “And you, you’re sure that Hans wants you back? You think you’ll go to the same place?”

“Yes...I feel confident. I know I want to go back...if not to Groesbeck’s, then at least near Simcoe... I know the area now, I know where things are. I like to go to places, and I want to see more of Canada. In Simcoe, there is the bus station, so I can go places on Sunday...Maybe even Toronto...I would like to see more,” he says, smiling. Below us, a wave of people has just begun to exit Gate B: tourists, business travellers, and people coming home at long last. Hector looks down at them for a moment, chewing on his thumb nail pensively, deliberating over something in his head. He looks away from them, looking me in the eye once more.

“You know... I speak with Hans the last few days before I leave. Hans say me that if I come back, if I come for four more seasons, if I work well, he will help me to immigrate to Canada.”

I was not expecting this.

“Simon tells me that Hans, that he can be a good man, and if I work with...*los mismos ganas...*” He stops, waiting for my translation

“The same enthusiasm”

“Yes, the same enthusiasm. He says he will help me.”

Hector goes on to explain how he slowly managed to earn Hans’ confidence after I left the farm in August, how he went from being one of the least desirable workers to gaining a degree of Hans’ trust. I see that Hector has learned quickly that the surest way to stay in the Seasonal Agricultural Workers’ Program is to gain the approval of an employer, so that the employer will nominate him to return in the following season. He knows that the only way he can return to the same farm is if Hans specifically requests him by name for re-hiring, and that his chances of returning altogether to Canada decrease greatly if he isn’t “named”. As he continues to explain certain events that happened during his last months in Canada, he credits his English abilities in helping him gain Hans’ trust. I remain supportive in my responses, but in my thoughts, I am suspicious of the employer’s sincerity in helping Hector emigrate. Over the past months, I have seen little evidence which would inspire trust in Hans’ word. Hector, on the other hand, although not quite as naive as I had once thought him to be, has shown tendencies to be over-trusting. I even worry that offering to sponsor Hector for immigration might be this farm owner’s idea of a cruel joke. But I say nothing.

“I talk to my wife, to Marta, last week. She gives me permission to go back to Canada this year. But she is not sure about moving to Canada. She tells me that a lot can change in four years...And that when the time comes, we put our options on the table...” Always an animated speaker, Hector pantomimes placing several cards in front of him, “And we choose the best one,” He taps one of the imaginary cards on the table with his palm.

“Marta will be able to find something in Simcoe, something for work. And Cynthia, she is young. She will learn English fast...Sammy, well, she has a base. I try to teach her a lot.”

I glance at my watch. It’s time for me to go to through the security gate. We stand up; Hector takes my paper cup and throws it, along with his own, into a nearby garbage bin.

“I didn’t say you any of this yesterday, in our interview”, Hector continues talking as we walk towards the escalators, “Maybe it’s important to add it in”

I nod and agree. Yesterday’s taped interview was no where near as informative as the talk we just had. In fact, it felt strange and artificial – living and working together on the farm, we had grown used to each other’s company and mannerisms, and had a certain comfortable presence when together. When I turned on the tape recorder, though, I felt oddly nervous. So did Hector. His characteristic grin had faded from his face as he tried to give formal, well-enunciated answers to the questions I asked while trying to have him artificially reflect upon his experiences in Canada. But, it did give me the space to explain generally what direction I had decided to take my project since leaving the farm. I had explained to him how I wanted to write a paper about people’s experiences in our

changing, globalising world, and about how people like him, migrant workers coming from Mexico to work in Canada, fit into this changing world. Hector surprises me by how much he had been listening to my academic rant the previous day.

“I think about what you say, yesterday. It’s true what you say about *el mundializacion* – about the globalisation... It’s changing the world. Here, it’s very hard. There are almost no jobs, and a good one, it is hard to keep. This idea of working in Canada....it’s very new. Years ago, it would not be possible, but now it is.....” The contemplative and sombre tone of Hector’s voice is offset by his wide grin as we walk down the central corridor of the airport.

“...I think, I think that’s the good side of globalization. Its got good sides and the bad sides. If you concentrate on the good side, you can find many opportunities... A year ago, I never would think of moving to Canada. If you tell me that, I say you’re crazy!...But now...that’s my plan.”

We continue walking.

“But, you’ll miss Mexico, won’t you?”

“Umm-hmm! Especially the food! No, I love my country. I never want to lose that part of me. My... ‘Mexicanicity’. ...But here, it’s ugly...It’s hard.”

We arrive at the security gate. It’s time to say good-bye. I thank Hector for everything he’s done for me, and I ask him to thank his wife and children for accommodating my presence so gracefully over the past week. He, in turn, thanks me for coming and visiting his family.

“You’ll come visit me on the farm in a few months, right?”

“I’ll be there.”

## **Prologue Part 2: Three Weeks Earlier, in Durango's Village**

The movie ends, and the credits roll on the 14-inch television screen sitting in the corner of Durango's one-room, concrete house. I sit on the small, dusty grey couch that doubles as his daughter's bed, while he and his wife sit on their bed a few feet away, organising the last of the mountain of papers and pay stubs that had surrounded them for most of the evening.

My week staying with Durango's family is drawing to a close, and tomorrow I will be flying back to Mexico City, to visit some of the other men I have worked with over the summer. Durango had offered to come with me on the bus to the state's capital, with the plan to drop off his post-contract report at the local migrant worker centre at the same time. One of the terms of taking part in the Seasonal Agricultural Workers' Program is for all workers to submit such a report after the end of their contracts and report their earnings and deductions over the course of their time in Canada. It had been two weeks since his return, and the office preferred to have all the required paperwork returned within the first month.

That is why his wife, Maria, and he had been busily filling out reports for the majority of the evening. As they were preparing for the blitz of report filling, Durango told me, with a hint of pride, how Maria had finished school, and how her writing was very good. He, on the other hand, like most of the other men in the village, had dropped out of school at a young age to help his father with the family farm. However, he informed me, although his writing skills were poor, he was still able to read quite well.

For most of the evening, he had been reading out the dates and numbers printed on the nearly forty weekly pay stubs he had collected during his contract in Canada at

Groesbeck Farm: gross income, net income, income tax deducted, air-fare deducted, employment insurance deducted, pension deducted. Meanwhile, Maria was meticulously filling out the rows and columns of the report, frequently stopping her husband to confirm the proper date and dollar amount.

To occupy me while they were taking care of this business, Durango had begun a movie on the DVD player that he had bought in Canada three years ago. He had mentioned this film several times through the week, and was adamant that I see it before I leave. It was called "*Asesinos del Desierto*" – "Desert Assassins". It was a low-budget telling of the fictitious story of two dozen would-be illegal migrant workers who try to enter the United States by crossing the Arizona Desert on foot.

The film was a heart-wrenching tragedy. It follows the reactions of the group members as those who collapse from heat exhaustion and dehydration are left behind to slowly die, while the bullets of Minutemen sharp-shooters promise a quicker demise.

Durango glances at the screen occasionally to launch the odd Spanish profanity at the film's antagonists. "Fuckin' racists!" Durango is temporarily distracted from his paperwork during the film, snarling viscerally at the gun-men, who appear faceless, watching the pilgrims at a distance through their rifle-scopes as they drop off, one by one, from exposure to the intense desert sun. These Minutemen, a real-life grassroots militia which patrols sections of the US/Mexico border, represent the most visible threat in the movie. "Sons of bitches, they are. Those are the bad guys, Nelson," Durango clarifies for me.

By the end of the film, all but three of the migrants have succumbed to the cruel desert heat, lack of water, and bullets of Minutemen snipers. It resolves with one of the

survivors, cursing his decision to come to the United States, being deported back to Mexico. The film fades to black, soberly listing the names and cause of death of the hundreds of people that have died on this stretch of land between the years 2000 and 2003, with a dedication to the hundreds more nameless and un-recovered individuals who did not succeed in their passage through the desert.

By the time the movie is over, Durango and Maria have completed the report and sealed it in a large manila envelope. Maria crosses the room to the far side, and replenishes the dwindling fire of the small wood stove with several chunks of scrap wood. Durango, having turned off the television, offers me a glass of tequila while Maria begins making us some bed-time snack quesadillas.

Handing me my glass, Durango sits on the couch next to me.

“We’re not far from that desert, in this movie. Not far from the border here, you know. Only a few hours,” he says in his mother tongue, taking a mouthful of his tequila. “That movie, those things really happen. People in the states, the border security, they’re fuckin’ racists... They shoot a guy trying to get in, just as a sign, so others don’t try getting in too.”

“Are there many people from here, from this village, that go to the States?” I ask.

“Yeah. Yeah. Some. A lot of my countrymen go, but not all of them get in. I’ve talked to some of the guys that have come back... You know that guy we talked to a couple days ago, the guy with the pickup truck? He went... For four or five years a few years back. But that guy, he didn’t walk the desert, he paid a coyote to take him over. (*Coyotes are smugglers specialised in transporting people over the Mexico/US border*)”



I sip my tequila, and it burns my throat. Durango's 5 year-old daughter and 4-year old son, who had spent most of the evening racing their two plastic toy cars around on the cement floor, are now sitting at the kitchen table, watching their mother grate a block of hard, white cheese.

"Have you ever thought of going?"

"Hmmp. No, no. I don't want to...The thing is, you go, and something happens to you, who's going to know? I go, and something happens to me, and my family will never know, you know...My wife and children, I have to think about them."

Durango adjusts his baseball hat and runs a thick hand down the lower half of his face, smoothing out his horseshoe moustache, and shakes his head pensively.

"It's thanks to God that I can go to Canada, Nelson. There, the work is sure. I know, I know I will have work every week. It's thanks to God."

I listen intently. I've known Durango for almost six months now, and we've shared a lot living and working together. But seeing him here, in his village with his family, has given me a chance to see a different side of Durango, a mature, perspicacious man that contrasts greatly with the jokester and carouser I had come to know on the farm. Over the week, I have become more acquainted with this aspect of Durango, and his candid conversations.

"You've been here for some days now, and you see how I live... I know I am poor, but there are people much poorer than me, here, in my state. You'll see, tomorrow, when we go to the city...There are people there that live in tiny houses, houses made of carton..."

"Of what...?" I ask, not immediately understanding the Spanish word for carton.

“Uh, of that stuff,” Durango clarifies, pointing at a cardboard box next to the television stand.

He continues on with his discussion, “No, it is really thanks to God that I go, that I am able to go. There are others, guys who want to be in this program, guys with large families. And these guys can’t enter...”

“Why not?”

“Different reasons. Some, because they have health problems, or because they went to jail for fighting or something... Or, even, if they tried to go to the United States, and got caught and sent back, that goes on their record. Then, they won’t be allowed in the Program.... I am lucky to go to Canada...But you know, all of this...” he sweeps his hand in a broad gesture, “The T.V., the phone, the bed”, Durango jabs at the air in the direction of each object, “All of these things I bought with Canadian money. But you know what they are, Nelson?... You know what?...They’re all luxuries.” He repeats the word, enunciating every syllable, “*Luxuries*- ....Even that fridge there, it’s a luxury. The most important thing is that I have a house, a house and food for my family...And that’s better... a lot better than many of my countrymen can say.”

Maria interrupts to tell us the quesadillas are ready. Durango has taken the time to share some very profound thoughts with me, and the meanings of the particular choice of film that he ensured that I viewed is not lost on me.

“*Salud*,” I say, draining my glass.

“*Salud*, Nelson”, and he does the same.

## **Chapter 1:**

### **Migrants, Individuals, and the Significance of the Ethnographic Experience**

In a discussion on an anthropology of the everyday, Jackson outlines the phenomenological method as being "... above all one of direct understanding and in-depth description – a way of according equal weight to all modalities of human experience, however they are named, and deconstructing the ideological trappings they take on when they are theorised. Phenomenology is the scientific study of experience" (Jackson 1996:2).

Cohen, making a case for the importance of the self as an element of anthropological study, argues that "[w]e must make deliberate efforts to acknowledge the subtleties, inflections, and varieties of individual consciousness which are concealed by the categorical masks which we have invented so adeptly. Otherwise, we will continue to deny people the right to be themselves, deny their rights to their own identities" (Cohen 1994: 180).

And finally, Rapport, in his assertion of the pre-eminence of the individual as an aspect of social life, affirms that "[t]here is no alternative to individuality, in short, no certain or direct access to another consciousness or to the world 'as is', and there is no other source of an individual's meanings but individuals themselves" (Amit and Rapport 2002:134).

It is these lines of thought which inspire this present work.

In general, this is a paper about experiences of migration, about Mexican labour migrants who make the annual journey north to secure a livelihood as participants in Canada's federally managed migration project, the Seasonal Agricultural Workers' Program (SAWP). The study of migration, the movements of people in search of work and a better life, has long been an area of anthropological interest (Kearney 1995). Regrettably, such movements are often "less than voluntary"; migrants' decisions to leave their communities of origin to supposedly less-deprived areas are frequently motivated by unequal distributions of wealth, property, and resources (Rapport and Overing 2000: 155). In their receiving countries, labour migrants find themselves at "the bottom of the economic ladder" (Binford 2003: 312) and placed in positions within the lower half of a dual labour market, in what Stalker has called the "three-D jobs: dirty, dangerous, and difficult" (2000: 4). This paper, then, outlines the structure of this program, explores the academic attention SAWP has received, and aims to convey a sense of the experiences lived by participants taking part in this program.

Yet, this work is also a study of everyday phenomenology, an attempt at representing individuals, in their complexity and vividness, as sense-makers in the world, operating within rather than being controlled by the categories to which they are ascribed.

In specific, then, this is a paper about individual lived experience, and so primarily focuses on the experiences of the two individuals who I have briefly begun to introduce in the prologue. Hector-Alberto and Durango are labour migrants who have come from Mexico to Canada, two of the nearly 12,000 individuals who annually voyage from Mexico to legally work in Canada's fields and greenhouses through Canada's government-mandated managed migration program. I came to know Hector-Alberto and

Durango during the spring and summer of 2006, during which time I worked with these two men on a large decorative tree farm in Southern Ontario and lived with them in migrant worker bunkhouses. The greater part of this current paper, then, is my retelling of a slice of these two individuals' experiences over the several months that I lived and worked with them.

Pairing a study of migration with an individual-centred approach seems rather appropriate given the attention both elements have received in the field of anthropology.

Eades (1987) and Kearney (1995) note that migration has held a special status in anthropology, being both central and marginal within the discipline. While the relevance of human movement to social life has been appreciated, theoretical models on the subject has been typically left to other disciplines to explore, while the inherent motions of migration have caused methodological difficulties for the traditional anthropological practice of uni-locale fieldwork (Kearney 1995, Amit 1999). As such, a great deal of anthropological work on migration has been informed on some level by economics or demographics (Eades 1987).

Meanwhile, studies of 'the individual' have enjoyed a similar position of centrality and marginality in anthropology: while ethnographic fieldwork is typically undertaken as essentially an establishment of a set of relationships between one individual (the fieldworker) and other individuals (the informants), the 'individual' as such has been relatively understated in the discipline. As Rapport expounds, theories which focus on socio-cultural forms rather than the individuals which operate within and create these forms has been the prominent fashion within anthropology (2003). While we have heard the stories of individuals via various research methods including the life-

history (Jourdan 1997), examinations of informants' unique and diverse world-views (Rapport 1993) or through ethnographies exploring the developing relationships between researcher and informant(s) (Rabinow 1977, Stoller and Olkes 1987), these styles of representation are dwarfed by a theoretical tendency to overlook individual distinction, to frame individuals as "collective constructs" (Rapport and Overing 2000: 193).

Thus, the archetypal labour migrant (if we are to temporarily imagine there is such a being) has been doubly crossed by academic thought and has been particularly vulnerable to having his/her experiences abstracted and simplified. While labour migrants are exposed to a number of structural, economic, linguistic, and political constraints that other individuals may not have to contend with, this does not mean that the institutions in which they operate ought to receive greater attention than their own lives and self-hoods. The relationships between the individual and the structures in which the individual operates are complicated to say the least, and questions about these relationships abound. Yet, "[h]owever much such questions are debated in anthropology, it should not detract, as it has a tendency to do, from an appreciation of the concreteness of individuality" (Rapport and Overing 2000: 186).

In many ways, then, this current project is a response to my frustrations of how labour migrants have been represented in the social sciences as either purely economic beings, or, only marginally better, victims of global processes or bureaucratically/governmentally-invoked structures beyond their understanding. Their migration may be economically motivated, but, I contend, their experiences can be explained beyond an economic rubric.

## **Methodology and a few comments on the style of this paper**

My fieldwork entailed living and working on a large decorative tree farm (which I have identified through the pseudonym 'Groesbeck Farms'), owned by Hans Groesbeck (also a pseudonym) located in the small village of 'Elmsdale' (yet again a pseudonym) in southern Ontario, near the town of Simcoe. Here, I lived in a bunkhouse with 11 Mexican labour migrants, and worked on the farm with them and 12 other Mexican migrants who were housed in similar bunkhouses on the same farm. I have changed certain names and minor details in order to conserve the confidentiality of those involved in this project.

This stint of fieldwork represented something of a return for me. I had previous experience living and working with Mexican migrant workers, as for the past three years, I have held summer jobs on several Ontario farms as both a farm labourer and a volunteer English-as-a-second-language instructor.

In 2003, I undertook a summer job with a non-profit organisation which places successful applicants on farms employing SAWP participants, with the goal of teaching English-as-a-second-language (ESL) courses during off-hours. To give some background information on this organisation's workings: The ESL teachers are typically housed in the same households as the migrant workers, and work at the same job and hours alongside them as well. Hours worked on the farm are paid at the same rate as what the migrant workers receive, while ESL instruction is done voluntarily. I was placed on Groesbeck Farms during my first year in the program, and it was here that I became aware of the issues surrounding the SAWP and became interested in learning more about the migrant experience, which eventually prompted my return to the same farm for anthropological fieldwork during the spring/summer of 2006.

I was re-employed on this farm once again as a farm labourer and as an ESL instructor. The advantages of returning to a place where I had already worked were numerous: being already familiar and experienced in the type of work meant that I was able to invest more energy into the research project and less energy into learning the nature of the work. As well, having previously lived on the farm meant that I already had developed friendships with many of the workers there – having these previous contacts also meant that I was able to form bonds of trust and friendship on the farm with the newer workers with whom I hadn't worked with before.

I was initially concerned about how my additional role of volunteer language instructor would affect my fieldwork in terms of how I was viewed in the eyes of my co-workers. However, I did not find this to be a problem. I had already received my initial training prior to beginning my time as an ESL instructor several years prior, in 2003. Thus, during my stint of fieldwork, my contact with the organisation was minimal, and consisted of a small briefing at the beginning of the summer, and instructions to fill a post-experience report in the fall. Supervision from the ESL organisation during the summer was non-existent, and I was free to plan and prepare course material and learning schedules as I saw fit. However, despite my best efforts, the majority of the workers showed little to no interest in learning English after our ten to fourteen hour work-days, and came to regard me as simply another worker, and, with only one worker interested in practising English on a regular basis, I found myself agreeing with them on this matter.

Following the end of my contract in August 2006, I maintained contact with a number of the workers, and returned to visit the farm in late September of the same year. During this time, I made plans to visit four of my co-workers (Hector-Alberto, Durango,



Eulogio, and Max) upon their return home to Mexico in late November. I ended up staying approximately a week with each man and his family, with the goals of this period of research were to gain an understanding of what these men's home situations were like, their reflections of their time in Canada upon their return, their adaptations to their return, and the opinions of their families on their migrations.

As I was interested in recording the lived experiences of labour migrants, my methodology primarily consisted of writing down descriptions of the daily activities on the farm and the conversations I heard and took part in while working in the fields and while at rest in the bunkhouse, typically during breaks, during our lunch hours, and after work in the evenings. As such, a large extent of the ethnography consists of reconstructions of conversations which I heard or took part in. Throughout my fieldwork, I experimented with structured interviews and recorded conversations, and found that this particular research method was not suitable in capturing the lived, everyday experiences of the people who are the topic of this paper. Although recordings were used for certain sections of my fieldwork (see Chapter 5 for more information), for the most part conversations here are based on reconstructions which I wrote down following the actual exchanges upon which they are based. Admittedly, I found reproducing these conversations in my field-notes to be challenging at first, but once I became more acquainted with my informants' manners of speech, I found such reproductions much easier to compose. Life on the farm primarily took place in Spanish, although the interplay between Spanish and English, Mexican and Canadian, was a part of everyday life. The majority of the conversations I have reproduced here originally occurred in Spanish, with the exception of most of the conversations between Hector and I. For the

sake of readability and space, I have elected to present my reproductions as translated into English, and have done my best to convey a sense of the various expressions, mannerisms, and profanities which may not have direct translations available, and have made an effort to let the reader know which language is being spoken during each conversation. I believe that the exchanges I have reconstructed are a reasonable representation of the speaker's thoughts, language, and opinions.

### **Outline of thesis**

I have already briefly introduced the protagonists of this paper, Hector-Alberto and Durango, in the prologue, as well as the general goals of the thesis as explained above. The structure for the remainder of this paper is as follows: Chapter 2 begins with a general overview of how studies of circular labour migration have been approached in the social sciences, with a specific focus on studies centred on migration from Mexico. I argue that the social sciences have allowed the discipline of economics to have the principal voice in explaining how an understanding of labour migration is to be approached, and I thus spend some time explaining the central neo-classical economic theories involved in migration studies. Chapter 3 examines the Seasonal Agricultural Worker's Program, first out-lining its history and its policies, and then explores the recent academic attention which this program has received. The chapter ends with my comments on the academic treatment given to the SAWP as of late. Chapters 4 to 6 focus on the experiences of my two primary informants, Hector-Alberto and Durango, and each chapter explores themes which held importance in their lives in Canada. Each of these main ethnographic chapters detail a set of relations which was of interest to the informant

involved: relations with one's family, relations to one's work, and the relations one creates and maintains with friends and co-workers. Chapter 4 presents the work experience and how Durango saw his work as a source of personal pride. Chapter 5 examines Hector's interest in photography and how he used digital photography as a means of staying present in the lives of his daughter in particular and family in general back home. Chapter 6 then examines issues of social inclusion and exclusion, contrasting Hector's challenges on the farm as a first-year worker and the exclusion he felt from the more experienced workers with Durango's experiences with group dynamics on the farm and his interest in creating a family away from home. Chapter 7 then concludes the present work by examining certain limitations in this thesis, and asks what an individual-focused study can say about transnational labour migrants, globalisation, and perhaps the human condition in general. In the epilogue, we come full circle with an ethnographic narration of the two protagonists' eventual return to their respective homes in Mexico at the end of their contracts.

## **Chapter 2:**

### **Some Perspectives on Transnational Labour Migration**

[I]t appears evidently from experience that a man is of all sorts of luggage the most difficult to be transported

-Adam Smith

The imaginary lines separating labour migrants, working tourists, refugees, and other travellers through the world are becoming increasingly blurred. With that being said, this chapter is concerned with providing an overview on theories, perspectives, and approaches that have been used to examine transnational labour migration, with a particular focus on circular “low-skilled” labour migration originating from Mexico (although, in reality, this so-called “low-skilled” manual labour actually requires high levels of expertise) . Kearney provides a satisfactory definition of transnationals involved in circular labour migration: “In a strict sense migration is the movement of people through geographic space... Contemporary migrants are predominantly workers moving from areas where they were born and raised to others where they can find a higher return for their labour” (1986: 331).

Kearney notes that the study of international movement of low-skilled workers is a relatively recent phenomenon, beginning in earnest in the early 1970’s when the end of economic expansion through most of the first world caused a dramatic shift in the labour needs of receiving countries: these migrants and immigrant workers suddenly became a “problem” within their receiving countries (1986: 332).

Eades argues that the theorisation of migration has been largely left to the fields of economics and demographics, while anthropology has been relatively mute on exploring the origins and impacts of contemporary large scale circular labour migration (1987). Principal theories of migration within the social sciences have been, and continue to be, largely informed by neo-classical economic approaches entwined with modernisation theories (Kearney 1986). A plethora of research has taken place in regards to Mexican/United States circular labour in the fields of sociology, economics, political science, and demographics which make use of these conceptual models. Additionally, these concepts continue to be the theoretical models which influence governmental decisions in regards to migration and public policy (Bauder 2006). In line with points made by Olwig, the preoccupation of migration studies, undertaken primarily by academics in the country where most of the Mexican labour migrants are bound (the United States) has been to determine what the impacts of such circular migration are upon the receiving communities (2001).

The following section provides an overview of the prevalent explanations of migration within the social sciences: the more prevalent interdisciplinary views on the causes and origins of migrant flows, and the affects of migration on sending and receiving communities. In the North American context in which the majority of these authors have written, research has been predominantly focused on providing explanations for the “problem” of circular low-skilled Mexican migration to the United States, where an estimated eleven million undocumented Mexican migrant workers currently operate (Martin 2003). Although the authors to be discussed below are writing on the unique situation of an under-developed country geographically located next to the world’s

wealthiest nation, they generally imply that the models they present could be applied to other circular migratory contexts.

### **Push and Pull Factors**

“Push” and “pull” factors summarise the elements of both communities of origin and receiving communities which play a role in encouraging a potential migrant to embark upon a circuit of labour migration. Push factors refer to negative elements which provoke a future labour migrant to leave his/her place of residence, such as lack of gainful employment or crop failure, while pull factors refers to the positive elements which attract him/her to a particular foreign place, such as an abundance of potential labour and relatively high wages (Kandel and Massey 2002). These pull factors in receiving societies can stem from the economic segmentation which creates a class of unstable, poorly paid jobs with limited opportunities for advancement (such as the manual farm labour) (Massey 1987), which, not being attractive to local workers, leaves a segment of the labour market open to act as a pull for migrant labour.

This macro neo-classical model proposes that labour migration eventually “levels-out” discrepancies between labour markets through these push and pull factors. Migration is caused and maintained due to supply and demand within labour markets and wage differentials between different areas. Poorer countries which have a high amount of labour in relation to capital will send workers to richer countries which have a low amount of labour in relation to capital. Eventually, a state of equilibrium will be reached; pools of labour decreases and wages increase in poorer countries, while the contrary occurs in receiving countries (Massey *et al* 1994).

Others have examined how these push and pull factors have originated in the case of Mexico. Jenkins explains that a growing Mexican rural population, combined with more capital-intensive production techniques being used on concentrated private land-holdings, has supplied a push factor, as fewer farm labourers are needed locally, while the population continues to rise. Meanwhile a strong economy has provided pull factors in the United States. In this case, migration results from the “strong push” within the Mexican economy and a “weak pull” from the US economy (Jenkins 1977, 186).

### **Network and Chain Migration**

Theorists also point out how social networks and links across borders may assist or motivate migrants to move. These networks may be present in the community of origin, as in a return migrant sharing information with others about his/her experience, wages, and presence of employment in the receiving community, or these networks may be present in the receiving community itself, where previously established migrants invite others to follow and help them become established themselves (Martin 2003). Massey *et al* describe migration networks as a broad concept that includes elements that enable people to learn about opportunities abroad before employing the various formal and informal infrastructures which enable migrants to cross borders and find jobs (1998).

These cases where pre-established migrants recruit and aid new migrants is also referred to as chain migration (Massey 1987).

### **Interactions between Factors**

Martin explains that for the labour migrant who migrates for economic reasons, these push, pull, and network factors typically work in unison (2003).

These three factors which motivate an individual to migrate do not have equal weight in a given situation, and the weight of each factor will change over time and from individual to individual. Typically, as Martin explains, push and pull factors are most important during the establishment of a migration flow, but, as the migration flow becomes more entrenched (a process that may span over months or generations), network factors increasingly play a greater role (Ibid). Martin takes as an example the case of Southern California, where he argues that much of the illegal migration today originated as a result of links that were formed during the Bracero years (a now-defunct migrant labour program similar to Canada's Seasonal Agricultural Workers' Program) of the 1950's and 60's, and which have since expanded, with these informal, family links replacing the former, formalised governmentally-managed links (Ibid).

To use this language of network, push, and pull factors in the context of the Seasonal Agricultural Workers' Program, in the case of a typical Mexican male participant, the relatively high wages and vacant job positions in the Canadian agricultural industry provide a pull factor, while the lack of gainful employment in rural Mexico provides the push factor. However, these two factors need to be linked somehow, which is where network factors come into play. A guest-worker program such as the SAWP provides a formal link through which to enter the program, connecting the two areas of Canada and Mexico, and the Canadian horticultural industry to a large pool of labour, much like a wire running between the plus and minus charges on a battery.



Subsequent informal network factors, such as word-of-mouth information about a program like SAWP from returned migrants to friends and families further strengthen such a link.

### **Development Theories**

Moving away from economic models which explain the root causes of migration, we are presented with two theoretical frameworks which look at the impacts of migration at the community level. Developmental theory proposes that low-skilled labour migration, such as that occurring in the Mexican/United States context, results in advantageous situations where migrant workers are able to strengthen the local economy of their communities of origin through the spending and investing of foreign earnings (Massey 1987, Massey *et al* 1994). The argument is relatively straightforward. First, migrants bring in new wealth to their local area which they either spend in local businesses or invest to produce their own sources of wealth and generally use to improve their standard of living and the standard of living of their families. At the same time, their stint of migration increases their community's human capital – they bring back new skills from the richer country which they can apply in their community (Kearney 1986, Binford 2003).

Orozco points out how this path towards development contrasts with former economic patterns of these regions. Many Central American countries have transformed from being exporters of agricultural products to exporters of agricultural labour. Yet, Orozco points out that it is still important to note that “migration represents a very important dimension; and family remittances specifically have constituted a major

dimension in integrating societies into the global context economically and socially” (2002:41).

### **Dependency Theories**

A review of the literature, however, suggests that much more academic work has concentrated on how migration, and especially circular labour migration from Mexico to the United States, creates circumstances of dependence where Mexican migrants come to financially rely on foreign remittances earned through migration. Dependency models typically frame the impacts of circular migration in a negative light, and argue that migration contributes to the continued under-development of certain areas.

Communities which send away high numbers of migrants suffer first of all by losing a valuable segment of their population; lack of labour causes local industry and agriculture to suffer (Massey 1987, Massey *et al* 1994, Martin 2006, Piore 1979).

Massey notes that the “migra-dollars” which migrants bring home are rarely invested in productive investments, and most money is spent on consumer items, and thus these monetary advantages are soon funnelled out of the community (Massey 1987). While it is true that the migrant’s standard of living generally improves from migra-dollars, he and his family become dependent on continued migration in order to sustain this life-style. In this theoretical outlook, cycles of migration come to be cycles of dependence, while the home community simply becomes the site of reproduction for additional migrant labour and a place of retirement for former migrants (Ibid; Kearney 1986; Binford 2003). “At the individual level, one trip has a way of breeding another, as high wages and living standards change tastes and expectations among people who initially plan only one trip. Within households, families adapt to the routine of

international migration and make it a permanent part of their survival strategies” (Massey 1987: 1375).

Preceding Massey in a similar vein, Piore examined how, at the individual level, participation in a high-wage economy away from one’s sending community impacts tastes and motivations, and leads people away from target earning and toward persistent migration (Piore 1979). Migrants may leave their home communities to earn money in order to realise certain goals, but the satisfaction of the wants which led to migration leads to the creation of new wants.

A predominant theme in this literature is how circular labour migrants become dependent on foreign earnings to the point where migration becomes the main source of employment across generations, and generally comes to be internalised as part of the local norms. In the presence of the possibility of the relatively high wages to be earned through migration, such transnational movements become accepted as part of local life, to the detriment of the local economy (Massey *et al* 1994, Reichart 1981, and Weist 1973). “The heavy involvement of Mexican communities and families in international migration contributes to a cultural milieu in which young people invest more faith in foreign wage labour than in Mexican education as a strategy for socio-economic mobility” (Kandel and Massey 2002: 996). Or, in Massey *et al*’s words, “In communities where foreign wage labour has become fully integrated into local values and expectations, people contemplating entry into the labour force literally do not consider other options: they expect to migrate frequently in the course of their lives and assume they can go whenever they wish” (Massey *et al* 1994: 1500).

Others have applied labels to this long-lasting form of transnational employment. Reichart refers to perpetual circular labour migration as the “migrant syndrome” (Reichart 1981: 59), while Weist claims that such forms of labour migration create a “culture of dependency” (1973:20). Massey refers to the self-generating process of migration as “the cumulative causation of migration” (1990:5).

### **Impacts of Migration on the Receiving and Sending Communities**

Wilson, in examining the effects of Mexican migration to communities in Southern California, found that foreign workers were vulnerable to exploitation due to their lack of political rights. Farm owners can and do, of course, benefit from this situation, as lower wages, a consequence of migrant workers’ exploitation, contribute to higher rates of profit. Wilson also argues that the presence of migrants can be used to undercut the domestic labour force, keeping wages artificially low. At the same time though, their presence allows enterprises to remain competitive by filling posts that would otherwise be unattractive, low-paid, and unstable. Since it is relatively expendable, and since the social costs of maintenance and reproduction is borne by the sending community, migrant labour can be used as an anti-cyclical mechanism for periodic expansions and contractions in the capitalist economy in general and the receiving community in particular (Wilson 1993).

Meanwhile, the sending community ostensibly changes its nature for long-term circular labour migrants. In areas where the majority of adult males engage in circular migration, the home community becomes a place of rest and relaxation; its social meanings morph as it becomes the resting point between migration circuits (Goldring 1990). As such, local farming and other agricultural activities lose importance (Mines

1981). “As migrants earn high wages and alter their consumption patterns, they adopt new lifestyles and local economic pursuits become less attractive”. (Massey 1990:1498)

The theorists presently under discussion generally agree that in areas where a “culture of migration” has been embraced, these transnational movements become a rite of passage and a common-place strategy for upward social mobility (Kandel and Massey 2002). This perpetual state of return and departure continually impacts the home community, further motivating others to take part in migrant circuits as well. “Once one or more people have come and gone in this fashion, however, the situation in the sending community does not return to the status quo ante. Each act of migration generates a set of irreversible changes in individual motivations, social structures, and cultural values that alter the context within which future migration decisions are made” (Massey et al 1994:1498).

Massey *et al* (1994) also point out that in such communities, labour migrants are not actually from the bottom of the economic ladder. Rather, labour migrants tend to be from the middle of the economic scale, not so poor as not to be able to afford costs of migration, but not so rich so that migration is not attractive. They have the means to absorb the costs of migration, but not so much that foreign labour is unattractive.

### **Critiques of these Approaches**

There are a number of critiques in regards to the above theoretical and conceptual models. While elements of these approaches have potential as to their explanatory value, they are, by-and-large, overly generalising and unable to provide an adequate description of the complexity occurring within processes of migration. In fact, rather than being explanatory tools used to describe complex phenomena, these ideas are more commonly

used as models applied to various situations in order to allow for simplification and abstraction. As Arango sums up:

The theoretical approach to immigration that has prevailed for the past fifty years does not adequately come to terms with the complexities of the current reality, and social scientists have consequently begun to question the two pillars upon which earlier models were built. At the micro-level, they question the conceptualisation of migrants as rational actors responding to economic disparities between countries. At the macro-level, they question the 'push-pull' approach, which views migration as a means of establishing equilibrium between regions of labour supply and demand. With seeds of doubt planted about the primacy of economic motives, the conceptual edifice of neo-classical economics has begun to wobble as never before (1998:8).

Additionally, the models which argue over whether or not migration leads to positive or negative impacts in the home community typically ignore the myriad factors at play such as the conditions of the home community, what investment opportunities are available, and the motivations and opinions of those taking part in migration themselves.

These conceptual models presume that a static homestead is the norm, and that migration is a deviation from this norm, an action only taken in dire situations. Kearney points out that, looking comparatively at human history, movement seems to be a rather normal part of the human condition, and hardly the abnormal process which the above theorists claim (1986). Similarly, Olwig critiques the underlying assumptions of push and pull theories:

The perception of migrants as persons who travel to settle permanently in another country has been supported, to a certain extent, by migration scholars' analysis of the push-pull factors believed to induce migratory moves. These studies thus give the impression that migrants stay put unless pushed out of their place of origin because of extraordinarily difficult conditions, or pulled away by attractive opportunities abroad. (2001: 17)

It would seem that these frameworks provide a limited and simplified approach to transnational movements, while ignoring many of the mitigating factors involved in cycles of labour migration. As models, these neo-classical economic theories are not typically based on qualitative or quantitative data, but are rather conceptualisations applied to real life situations after their formation. For instance, the “levelling-off” effect described in the macro neo-classical concept of push-and-pull has yet to be realised in any concrete situation. Despite, or perhaps because of these models’ simplistic framework, these neo-classical economic theories have been, and continue to be, extremely influential in the formation of governmental decisions and public policy in dealing with migration. It is these simplified models of humanity which have played a role in creating the situation where goods and capital often have more transnational rights and protections than do human beings.

With this in mind, my major concern, then, is how the individual comes to be represented within migration studies. A broad interdisciplinary review of migration studies indicates that, within the social sciences, “low-skilled” migrant labourers have long been categorised as simplified economic entities, while their social lives and individualities as a primary focal point has received meagre academic attention. A striking majority of attempts to understand processes of migration have been informed primarily by economic approaches, while the social and individual factors at play have been largely pushed to the side.

A common thread through these theories is that processes of migration appear to be relatively subject-less phenomena. The theories which consider individual action largely ignore individual agency (and individuality for that matter) by focusing squarely

on limited micro-level market-based decision making. The individual is abstracted, and, at best, the migrant himself comes off as a victim of larger economic processes beyond his control or understanding. By focusing primarily on the economic aspects of migration, and ignoring the social and individual factors involved, these frameworks ultimately provide a rather limited and unsatisfactory understanding of the lives of the individuals impacted by migration, and of the phenomenon of migration itself. In the words of Hvidt, one

“...cannot help sighing a little at the firm, sometimes even heavy-handed and generalising way in which...individual human lives have been dragged in and out of diagrams and tables, and have had motives for momentous decision ascribed to them which they themselves very likely would have regarded without much understanding” (1975: 35).

### **An Example of a Humanistic Approach**

Anthropology has been described as having one foot planted in the social sciences, with the other resting in the domain of the intellectual humanities (Rapport and Overing 2002). Thus, an anthropological approach differs in respect to the approaches used in other social sciences, and offers a possibility for a more humanistic approach to studies of migration. A brief ethnographic example of a possible shift in direction, then, can be found in the work of Belinda Bozzoli (1991) on women in South Africa who migrate from rural to urban areas in search of paid employment. Her book, *Women of Phokeng*, is based on the life histories of twenty-two women from a small village who have spent their lives in a rural-urban-rural cycle of migration. Having become domestic servants during the 30's and 40's, they eventually settle and raise families in the Johannesburg area, and finally, as elderly women, return to their communities of origin.



Bozzoli begins by critiquing the conception that the oppression of women has been a function of capitalism. As Bozzoli explains, the women she spoke with, despite having very few work options, were far from being victims, but were rather entrepreneurs and active participants in the formation of their lives. Bozzoli succeeds in showing these women as taking control of their lives even though they experience certain economic and social constraints. And by relaying on these women's oral accounts, she shows them as significant social actors rather than victims of social forces, while also exploring the varied experiences of migration. By highlighting their intentionality, Bozzoli explains how each woman pursued her own particular "life strategy": "Each woman views herself as a decision-making existential being, who has pursued a strategy of her own. The strategy is not an independent one, but is linked to and dependent upon the possibilities...provided by the changing material world" (1991: 236).

Such a perspective serves to show us the complex myriad of interacting processes which combine under the umbrella term of "migration". As Bozzoli explains, an approach focusing on individual experience highlights the dynamic processes at play, such as the interactions between economic and social relations within and between the individual's household, home community and the broader political economy at large. More importantly, though, it also underscores the heterogeneity of the migrant "experience", and that "groups" of migrants are only groups in as so far as we, as outsiders, classify them as such. Rather than apersonal, distant theoretical explanations for migration, we are instead presented with individuals who respond to and create the experiences they encounter, along with their assorted individual histories, goals, and reasons for embarking upon migration.

As Bozzoli's sensitive approach to the lives of woman migrants in South Africa shows, an approach which recognises the "universality of individual diversity" (Rapport 2003) can be pivotal in understanding the myriad underlying experiences of migration. Unfortunately, such studies are in the minority, and are dwarfed by the multitude of studies which attempt to explain what actions abstracted subjects take in given generalised situations. By putting a human face on the actors whose experiences we endeavour to understand, we may come to the conclusion that not only is the individual lived experience of life a worthy subject of study in its own right, but can also cast light on our understandings of larger, global processes in which these lives are played out and how these global processes are, in actuality, aggregations of individual decisions.

Labour migration is ostensibly undertaken by many for primarily economic reasons. But this does not mean that migration should be understood as purely an economic phenomenon, and that social and individual processes should be ignored. Having briefly explored predominant themes in studies of migration, along with critiques of these lines of thought, as well as presenting the possibility of a less-economic, individual-centred approach which acknowledges the human as a dynamic decision-making and sense-creating being, I now direct the reader to the following chapter, which address academic literature pertaining directly to Canada's Seasonal Agricultural Workers' Program.

### **Chapter 3:**

#### **The Seasonal Agricultural Worker's Program: Past, Present, and Problematics**

“Without migrant workers, we wouldn't have a fruit and vegetable industry in Ontario.” – Comment by an Ontario grower (Greenhill and Aceytuno 1999:1)

The story of migrant farm labourers in Canada takes place within the structural setting of the Seasonal Agricultural Workers' Program (SAWP), the federally managed migration program which allows these individuals to come to work in Canada, and formulates the framework in which their experiences take place while they are here. As such, the overall majority of academic attentions given to elements of the SAWP have focused on the policies and problematics of the program's structure and its explicit and implicit objectives. The following chapter provides an overview of the SAWP program, its history and objectives, as well as a brief review on the academic attention which the SAWP has received.

#### **History and Structure of the Program**

The history of the Seasonal Agricultural Workers' Program can be traced back to the 1950's, when both global competition abroad as well as increasing competition from other sectors within Canada put farm owners in a difficult position (Satzewich 1991). An increasingly globalised marketplace meant that farm owners had to invest in newer technologies while keeping their product prices low, while, at home, expanding manufacturing and service industries found agriculturists competing for affordable labour (Ibid, Martin 2003 and Basok 2002). Faced with increased costs of production without

similar increases in profit, farmers were beginning to find themselves in a cost-price squeeze, and began lobbying the government for assistance in the perpetual challenge of finding skilled, reliable and affordable labour to ensure successful growing seasons. Farmers complained that the only labour that they could afford to hire were the inefficient local workers with poor work ethics, and appealed to the government to allow them to recruit more affordable and reliable labour from abroad, and that, in fact, this was a necessary step in order for Canadian agriculture to remain viable (Bauder 2006). Meanwhile, Canadian workers, for their part, were finding employment in other sectors such as manufacturing and the service industry, finding the dirty, difficult, and dangerous nature of farm work (Stalker 2000) increasingly unattractive. Ironically, while the rest of Canadian industry was going through an expansion, this same economic expansion negatively affected agriculture through what Satzewich describes as the “cost-price squeeze of the 1960’s” (1991:153). Between 1961 and 1970 farm wages increased by 91.3%, cost of inputs by 22.9%, cost of interest and taxes by 51.8%, and cost of living in rural areas by 25.7%. By comparison, agricultural prices only increased by 26.7% between 1961 and 1968 (Ibid).

In the 1960’s, the government attempted to initiate several programs to aid farm owners, including recruiting from provinces with high unemployment rates such as Quebec and the Maritimes, as well as suggesting several work-for-welfare programs to introduce welfare recipients into the labour market. These initiatives eventually failed or were rejected, and farm owners once more iterated that Canadian workers were typically not dependable – they were generally unwilling to accept the working conditions and low

pay, and those who accepted employment were prone to quitting their positions at crucial times in the season (Basok 2002, Satzewich 1991).

In recognition of farm owners' difficulties, the Canadian state began forming several inter-governmental agreements with Commonwealth Caribbean countries during the late 1960's and with Mexico in the early 1970's. These agreements, which would come to create the Seasonal Agricultural Worker's Program, would grant Canadian growers the right to recruit temporary workers from outside of the country.

The program began small – in 1968, 1258 Jamaican workers were recruited. In 1967, Barbados, and Trinidad & Tobago were added to recruitment countries (Bauder 2006), while in 1974, the first 200 Mexican migrant workers were allowed entry into Canada (Basok 2000, Preibisch 2003). Since its inception, the program has grown in popularity among growers – by 1985, there were 4173 workers from the Caribbean and 832 workers from Mexico. That number had increased to 6327 Caribbean workers and 5215 Mexican workers by 1996 (Bauder 2006:155). Presently, there are over 18 000 migrant workers in Canada, with over 15 000 in Ontario alone (F.A.R.M.S. 2007). In 1989, women were admitted for the first time, and farm owners were permitted to request workers according to gender. Women currently make up 2-3% of the MSAWP workforce (Verduzco and Lozana 2003).

This program legally allows foreign workers to enter Canada to work under contracts ranging from 6 weeks to 8 months, and was originally managed by Human Resources and Development Canada. The administration of the program was privatised in 1987, with control given to Foreign Agriculture Resource Management Services (F.A.R.M.S.), a non-profit organisation controlled and funded by Canadian farm owners

themselves. Until this time, quotas as to the number of workers allowed to be admitted had stood at 4000. One of F.A.R.M.S first actions was to lift these quota restrictions and allow the SAWP to operate on a supply-and-demand basis (Martin 2003).

### **Policies of the SAWP**

Farm owners in Canada request a certain number of workers per season, typically 8 weeks before the start of the working contract, and inform F.A.R.M.S. of the number, gender, and country of origin of the workers they wish to receive, as well as informing which “named” (see below) workers they wish to re-hire. Recruitment and certain aspects of the administration process in the sending country is undertaken by sending-country government officials, who process the request, and present workers’ documents (including medical clearances and passports) to a Canadian Immigration office, which subsequently issues a temporary work permit for the requested time period. A worker is issued a contract which allows him to work only on the particular farm of the grower who requested him (Basok 2002 and 2003, Martin 2003).

Employers may facilitate this immigration process by rehiring workers from the previous season. This practice of nominating workers from previous years, known as “naming”, benefits both employer and employee: the farmer is able to retain experienced workers, while the worker, as long as he remains satisfactory to his employer, can expect re-employment year-after-year. The mechanism of “naming” has proven very popular – at any given time, around 70% of workers are returning, “named” participants (Verduzco and Lozano 2003). Workers typically return for several seasons; the average stay being 7 years, (Ibid.) with some participants, as I have seen during my fieldwork experiences, have been involved in the program for over 20 years.

Workers are covered under provincial health care schemes and pay into income tax and Canada pension funds. Their housing is provided by the employer, usually on-site at the place of work, while airfare transportation is paid for in part by both employer and employee. Wages are also set slightly higher than provincial minimum wage (Bauder 2006, Basok 2002).

90% of the workers are employed in Ontario, where the majority of Canadian horticulture (including the rapidly expanding greenhouse industry) is present (Bauder 2005, Basok 2002). The high number of returning participants and the overall increasing number of farms and additional participants have been used as evidence of the program's satisfactory nature to both employer and employee (Martin 2003).

The program operates under the following five guiding principles:

- Improve Canada's prosperity by ensuring that crops are planted and harvested in a timely fashion and in the process enhancing the job prospects of Canadian workers dependent on agri-related employment.
- Enhance the efficiency of the Canadian economy through an improved allocation of labour and skills
- Improve the well-being of migrant workers by giving them access to better paying jobs and reducing the risks associated with illegal migration
- Facilitate the return of guest workers to their countries in a predictable manner
- Enhance the confidence of the public, including the potential migrant, in policies and practices governing the migration system, the impact on the domestic labour force, and general benefits of the SAWP (Greenhill and Acetunyo 2005: 5)

### **Overview of the SAWP and its policies:**

The program's continued existence and expansion is justified by a continuation of the same arguments which were used to convince the government to initiate the program in the first place. A limited agricultural labour pool has been a long-running constraint within the Canadian horticultural sector. On one hand, seasonal farm work, seen as difficult, dirty, and dangerous, is typically not attractive to Canadians who can find year-

round work with typically higher wages, more benefits, and potential opportunity for upward mobility (Martin 2003). Growers have had to compete with the manufacturing sector and a rapidly expanding service sector for low-skilled labour, while Canadian citizens have “self-selected” themselves out of farm work in favour of these typically higher paying or more comfortable jobs (Binford 2003). Further complicating the matters has been increasing rural-to-urban migration that has decreased the number of potential workers in the agricultural sector. On the other hand, expanding global competition and rising input costs have placed growers in a “cost-price squeeze”: Rising seed, fuel, and fertiliser costs simply are not balanced out by similar rises in the profits made by the sale of produce. The result is that improving wages and working conditions to make farm labour attractive to Canadians is becoming increasingly difficult. Additionally, the face of agriculture is changing, from that of the small-scale family farm which made use of family labour to a large-scale consolidated corporate model (Basok 2002), which has further expanded the need for hired labour. Farm owners have been able to justify the continued existence and growth of the program using several criteria: That the jobs are not attractive to Canadians’; that it is a “special” industry; and that it needs special attention in order to survive in the face of increasing global competition (Satzewich 1991).

### **Academic Attention directed towards the SAWP**

As the SAWP program has been increasing in size, so has the amount of academic attention it has received, particularly in the last ten years. Many disciplines have written on the subject, from sociology (Preibisch 2003, Basok 2002 and 2003, Satzewich 1991), geography (Bauder 2006), economics (Martin 2003), and law (Verma 2003) to economic



anthropology (Binford 2002). The above authors have looked at a variety of aspects of the program, from the demographics of the program, the use of remittances, to media portrayals of the SAWP program and its participants. However, an underlying theme in the majority of these works has been a critique of the SAWP program and its structure, while most of these academics make the implicit or explicit point that the program is based on a model of exploitation:

The offshore labour program exists to supply disciplined and flexible labour at the lowest possible cost to Canadian growers...The Canadian horticulture industry has several options to meet the increasing competition from international and national producers. First, it could satisfy its own need for short-term seasonal labour by offering wages and working conditions that would appeal to a sufficient number of Canadian workers. This option is expensive and would likely lead to the collapse of the industry...Second, the industry could mechanise harvesting activities and use labour more effectively. The third option is to hire workers with low expectations regarding wages and working conditions, who can be disciplined by denying them basic social and economic rights. The offshore program was designed to bring such a workforce to Canadian farms. (Bauder 2006: 157)

This academic focus on (and, as I will later argue, something of a preoccupation with) the exploitative elements and arguments for social justice is something to which I will return.

### **The demographics of the program and remittances**

There are certain key differences between the Caribbean section of the SAW program (CSAWP), and the Mexican section of the SAW program (MSAWP), mostly in regards to the selection criteria stipulated by Canada. Having formulated the program guidelines for MSAWP later than the CSAWP, certain additions to the selection protocol was created by Canadian officials. In the case of MSAWP, participants have to be un-or underemployed, have below average education, be from a rural area, and have a spouse

and children in order to be eligible for the program. Human Resource and Development Canada state that this program, as a form of aid for underdeveloped countries, is thus able to allow employment for the more disadvantaged section of the Mexican population (HRDC 2005). More cynical academics have commented that these selection criteria also make sure only the section of the Mexican population who are most likely to return home upon termination of their contracts are selected (Basok 2002, Satzewich 1991). This has created differences in the demographics between the two sections of the program: Mexican participants are more likely to complete their contracts and are more likely to return to Canada year-after-year over longer periods than their Caribbean counterparts. Binford cites these factors as one of the reasons that Mexican migrant workers are quickly becoming the migrant worker of choice, as farmers realise the importance of establishing an experienced work-force that they can depend on to return each year, as opposed to training new workers each season. While the total number of participants in the program has been growing since the program's inception, the number of Mexican workers has been increasing at a much faster rate than Caribbean workers (2002).

With this in mind, the remainder of this literature overview focuses primarily on research that has focused only on the Mexican constituent of the SAWP.

The general consensus in the literature is that, for the majority of workers who come to Canada, the primary reason for them to come here to work has been to earn money to support themselves and their family (Preibisch 2003, Binford 2002, and Bauder 2006). Basok found that, on average, most workers are able to save and send home approximately \$8000 CAN during a typical 8-month contract (Basok 2000). Studies of remittances show that earnings from a migrant worker's first year in Canada typically go

towards paying debts incurred prior to participation in the program (Ibid.), then, earnings from subsequent years (70% of workers in MSAWP are returning participants) go towards material goods such as constructing a house or funding the education of the worker's children (Basok 2000, Preibisch 2003). Preibisch has examined how the nature of how these remittances are spent (rather than invested) causes a circular situation where workers are required to return year-after-year to continue to afford their families the lifestyle which their earnings provide (2003).

Additionally, other researchers have examined how the governmental organisations involved have vested interests within MSAWP. For instance, in the case of the Mexican government, the benefits gained from the migrant worker program are three-fold: first, the country is relieved of an otherwise unemployed or underemployed section of the population; second, a number of employment positions are created to administrate and manage the program; and, as well, a large amount of Canadian dollars flow into the Mexican economy in the form of remittances (Verma 2003). We can estimate that if the approximately 9000 Mexican labour migrants in the program last year each sent \$8000 home as remittances, then we see that 72 million Canadian dollars that MSAWP brings into the Mexican economy gives the Mexican government relative incentive to promote this program. The Canadian government, for their part, has much to benefit from the program as well. First, they are able to please the relatively politically powerful Farmer's Lobby by providing a pool of cheap labour (Basok 2002), secondly, and interrelated, they ensure that Canadian agriculture remains competitive in the global market (Verma 2003).

## **The Social Justice Aspect**

As I previously mentioned, a large body of information has been published dealing with the exploitative elements of the MSAWP. This collection of social justice arguments have revolved around two underlying aspects which impact upon agricultural migrant workers' living and working conditions in Canada: Ontario labour laws and the structure of the SAWP. Essentially, by allowing for the employer to have a disproportionate amount of power in the relationship between him/herself and his/her employees, a situation is created which allows for exploitative conditions to occur.

In Ontario, where the grand majority of SAWP participants are employed, no agricultural worker, migrant or otherwise, is covered by the provincial labour laws extended to other industries. What this means is that agricultural workers, Canadian citizen or migrant, do not enjoy the same labour protections extended to workers in other industries in regards to maximum number of hours worked per week, overtime and vacation pay, and basic labour safety laws. An excerpt from Ontario's Employment Standard's Act in regards to agricultural employees states: "Employees in this industry are exempted from employment standards related to: hours of work, daily and weekly or biweekly rest, between-shift rest periods, eating periods, overtime pay and paid public holidays" (2007). Academics have commented that without basic labour standards, the conditions of migrant workers, down to having a lunch break and an occasional day of rest, depend solely on the good-will of their employers (Martin 2003, Basok 2002).

Additionally, farm owners are obligated to provide housing for workers, but few laws govern the condition of housing provided and inspections are few and far between (Basok 2000 and 2003, Preibisch 2003), while the process of "naming", in which farm

owners select which migrant workers they wish to rehire, ostensibly prevents migrant workers from protesting against their living and working conditions for fear of not being selected to return the following year (Basok 2000 and 2003, Preibisch 2003, Verma 2003).

The argument that migrant agricultural workers in Canada compose a pool of ‘unfree labour’ has been the starting point from which most researchers have begun their social justice argument. Basok (2000 and 2002) is credited with having elaborated on the concept and her definition of unfree labour has been used in subsequent discussions on the conditions of migrant workers (cf: Preibisch 2003, Verma 2003, and Binford 2002). Building upon definitions first elaborated on by Satzewich (1991: 39-42), Basok describes “unfree labour” as consisting of “workers whose ability to circulate in the labour market is restrained through political and legal compulsion” (2002:4), and expands the definition to include workers’ inability to refuse employers’ demands or dispute their working/living conditions (principally due to the mechanism of naming discussed above). She argues that both the structure of the SAWP program and the economic circumstances of the migrant workers’ locales of origin cause this state of unfreedom and conditions workers to be complacent, docile, and hardworking. Additionally, Basok surmises that it is this state of unfreedom that has made migrant workers attractive to farm employers rather than their cheap labour, and as such that migrant labour has become a “structural necessity” (2002:14) to Canadian horticultural – the industry would simply fail to be viable if this unfree labour didn’t exist. As Basok elaborates:

I would argue that migrants would be a structural necessity only if they were hired as unfree labour merely because no other categories of people, be they citizens or immigrants, could be employed under these conditions in a capitalist

society. Both free migrants and free immigrants, although convenient, can be replaced by domestic labour if native workers are desperate enough to accept the '(im)migrant jobs' or if working conditions and pay are improved to meet the expectations of the domestic workers (2002:14).

Using the dual fact that SAWP migrant workers represent a particularly vulnerable yet valuable population, Basok and other researchers argue that their conditions in Canada and the structures in place which allows these conditions to exist represent a human rights violation (2003).

Working from this conceptual base, the majority of academics writing on labour migrants in the SAWP have essentially formed a catalogue of the various mistreatments and exploitative elements that migrant workers endure while in Canada: social exclusion (Basok 2002, Preibisch 2003), long working hours (Basok 2002, Binford 2002), poor and crowded housing conditions (Russell 2003), lack of medical care (Basok 2000 and 2002, Preibisch 2003), unsafe working conditions (Verduzco and Lozano 2003); and more. Most of these researchers have based their arguments on data that was obtained via questionnaires (Russell 2003), surveys (Verduzco and Isabel Lozano 2003), structured interviews (Basok 2003, Binford 2002), or newspaper articles (Bauder 2006).

I commend these researchers' investigations into the problematic of this program, and I whole-heartily applaud their end goals of improving the situations experienced by labour migrants in Canada. With that being said, however, while I do not disagree with the studies that these researchers have produced on migrant workers and the Seasonal Agricultural Workers Program, I am concerned with the general direction which their arguments have collectively taken, and I take issue not so much with what they say, but rather what they do not say. While I admire the work of the above researchers in respect

of their identifying and exposing the questionable structures of this guest-worker program, I remain unsatisfied with the abundance of academic attention that has been focused upon primarily one narrow dimension of the Seasonal Agricultural Workers' Program, and I oppose the subsequent one-dimensional portrayal of migrant workers and their experiences within this confining perspective.

Griffith, in his comparative study on the SAWP with the United States' similar migrant worker program, the H2 program, makes a similar point:

Far more often than being the focus of best practices, most scholarly, media, and political attention toward the two programs has highlighted the ways that the programs have developed primarily to benefit agricultural producers, sometimes at the expense of foreign workers and their families (2003:1).

While Griffith speaks of the fact that academics prefer to focus on the negative aspects rather than points of success within a guest-worker program, I see a similar situation in which the structure of the SAWP program is receiving more academic attention than the individuals operating within this program. The majority of researchers studying circular labour migration in Canada have taken a critical approach to the government's managed migration program, and have for the most part, somewhat unfortunately I believe, focused solely on the bureaucratic and legalistic structures of the program. While I find myself in support of their attempts to bring to light the abuses and structural disregard for the working and living conditions of migrant workers, I object to their somewhat limited portrayals of the migrant experience.

By portraying the labour migrant as a victim, and looking at these situations from top-down, the majority of academics writing on the SAWP ignore personal agency, and how the SAWP participants themselves react to the exploitative systems in which they

find themselves embedded (and even if the migrants themselves would define their conditions as exploitative). They concentrate on only one narrow section of the lived experience of migrant workers in Canada – that of the “exploited worker”.

I am equally concerned about the language used to describe the migrant worker experience in this writings. In the case of Basok (2002), such terms as ‘conditions of captivity’ (14), ‘unfreedom’ (4) , ‘unable to refuse work’ (16), “ ‘captive’ labour force” (151) are used to portray labour migrants and the conditions they face without due reflection on what such terminology is saying in regards to their own free will and lived experiences.

Along similar lines, Bauder *et al*, analysing a newspaper article in which a farm owner is said to have shown care and consideration in his dealings with his migrant employees, comments “Since these workers are unfree, as Basok and Satzewich demonstrate, we were enticed to draw a parallel to a family who is emotionally attached to their pet, but does not *grant it any independent decision making power*” (Bauder et al 2003: 12, italics added). I find it rather disconcerting that such a parallel is being made without due contemplation.

Writings such as these engage terminology which has an effacing effect on the agency of migrant workers. While the end goals of these researchers can be seen as noble, the methods they use in the process are not. Migrant workers may be entrenched in a system that does not recognise their full humanity (and I doubt that there exists any economic or bureaucratic system able to deal with one’s full humanity), but current academic writings on SAWP participants, by not engaging with ideas of agency and lived experience, are emulating rather than challenging these representations. Writings on



SAWP participants' experiences in such a system ought to go against this structural dehumanisation, rather than simply providing a reflection of these same ideas by defining these labour migrants as victims. To victimise is often to dehumanise.

To recap the advantages and disadvantages which impact the experiences of migrant workers in Canada as participants of the SAWP: The reality is that foreign workers represent a particularly vulnerable population. Yet SAWP participants enjoy protections that would not apply to illegal migrants: access to provincial health-care regimes, a work contract with a guaranteed minimum number of hours, a pay higher than that of the provincial minimum wage, partially subsidised transportation to and from Canada, and free housing provided on-site by their employer. On the negative side, the fact that the program is administered principally by the same individuals who utilise migrant labour has created a "trust the employer" situation (Martin 2003). The SAWP lacks worker representation or independent voices within the program's organisation, while the structure of the program creates the conditions where less than ideal working and living conditions for migrant workers have the possibility of occurring.

So far, research into this program has placed an excess of attention onto the possible conditions which the structure of this program could create, and not enough on the actual experiences of its participants. "Meaning lies in relationships as they are *lived* and not simply in the structural and systematic properties that analysis may reveal them to have" (Jackson 1996: 26). Perhaps it may be worthwhile to return "such notions as consciousness, imagination and emotion, even conversation and interaction, power and exchange to their individual owners" (Rapport, unpublished manuscript). It is with this in mind that I now turn to Durango's story in finding pride in his work.

## **Chapter 4**

### **To Have Pride in One's Work: Durango's becoming a Hole-Maker**

Remember the observation Bertrand Russell made in his collection of 'Sceptical Essays'...However well we might think we know Shakespeare's Hamlet, he asked, how many of us recall the part played by the 'First Sailor', whose sole contribution is to utter the words 'God Bless You, Sir'? But imagine, Russell continued, a group of men whose business it was always to enact this role. Would they not invent systems of symbolic interpretation and theory according to which the First Sailor's four words were key to the entire drama? (Rapport, unpublished manuscript).

In the previous chapter, I made mention of how academics have posited SAWP participants as a pool of "unfree labour" and a "structural necessity" to Canadian horticulture. In this chapter I argue that we ought to attempt to understand what the processes of work mean for its practitioners, in this case migrant workers on Groesbeck Farms, and examine the creative and innovative ways in which individuals make work 'their own', regardless of the circumstances in which the work takes place. It is hardly a contentious claim that work, for its practitioners, is much more than simply an economic activity, or an exercise in exploitation. "Being (also) a psychological matter, it is both more and less than economic activity; however instrumental or impersonal the attitude of others to his work, it is, for the worker, a personal experience, his relation to the reality in which he lives" (Wallman 1979:2)

The most prominent reflections of the more adverse aspects of the interactions between one's work and the on-going production of one's self can be found in Marx's ideas of alienation. As the line of thought goes, one produces one's self through a

relation to one's labour and the products of one's labour. By losing control of the production process, a worker loses a part of himself as well.

This is the relationship of the worker to his own activity as something alien, not belonging to him; it is activity as suffering (passivity), strength as powerlessness, creation as emasculation, the *personal* physical and mental energy of the worker, his personal life. . . . as an activity which is directed against himself, independent of him and not belonging to him (Marx 1964: 126).

As discussed in the previous chapter, SAWP participants, holding a particularly vulnerable position in the Canadian labour market, are often exposed to circumstances where conditions and feelings of alienation can occur. "Migrants in any system are said to work harder and to put up with conditions that no indigenous worker would tolerate, exactly because they tend to be future orientated and to see conditions 'away', however inhospitable, as somehow better than conditions at home." (Wallman 1979: 9)

Yet, to examine work solely from the point of view of the power relations in which the work takes place is to miss out on what work entails and means for the worker. "[I]f all livelihood is controlled by structures of power and exploitation...then the real meaning of work is governed by larger and more inevitable processes than those analysed by the methods of social anthropology" (Wallman 1979: 3). Wallman implies that work is governed by large and small scale processes, and it is these small, day-to-day processes that may be of interest to anthropology. Perhaps less heavy-handed interpretations may be in order, which show how social actors are able to display agency in the ways in which they interact with their work and in the strategies they use to claim or reject identities from work.

Along these lines, in this chapter, I explore how Durango, who I have briefly presented in the prologue, understood his own relation to the labour process, and his

growing feelings of identification rather than alienation to one particular set of tasks. In the process, I further introduce Durango and explain the task of “staking” – a job that may seem inconsequential and trivial at first, but which had been attributed great importance and meaning by the migrant workers employed at Groesbeck Farms. In particular, I look at Durango’s transition to the role of ‘hole-poker’, and the initial strain and eventual identification and pride he felt once he had assumed this role.

### **Durango: A Preliminary Introduction**

This is Durango’s second year at Groesbeck Farms, and his fourth in Canada as a participant in the Canadian guest-worker program. Durango isn’t his legal name, but rather the name of his home state and a nick-name he had been given during the first few weeks of his first year at Groesbeck Farms, a common practice amongst the workers on the farm. His name was given to him for a number of reasons- not just because he grew up in a small village in this northern state (which was already something of a rarity – most of the SAWP participants were from the southern states surrounding Mexico City), but also because he fit the stereotypical image, in his appearance, his speech, and his mannerisms, of the rugged cowboy figure that many of the migrant workers at Groesbeck’s associated with his home in the Sierra Madre.

Durango stands at a height that towers over the other workers, with massive shoulders and arms strengthened through years of cattle ranching, along with a belly beginning to show signs of a heightened appreciation for beer. A gifted story-teller, Durango spends his work days regaling his co-workers in his loud, gruff voice with tales of growing up on his now deceased father’s ranch, cockfighting, and boasting about the size of the fish he had caught in the ponds during the last day off. His aged, weather-

beaten face and slight bend to his back betray his 31 years of age, giving him the impression of being grimmer and harsher than his jovial, easy-going attitude actually confers. Framing the lower half of his face is his proud black horse-shoe moustache. This moustache that had instigated more than one confrontation in the bunk-house, as before each of our weekly grocery shopping trips, Durango has a habit of monopolising the bathroom beyond his 10 minute allocation – carefully shaving away the scruff he has grown over the week, meticulously trimming this moustache and the small tuft of hair he leaves growing under his thick bottom lip.

For most new workers, their nick-names had only lasted for a few weeks or maybe a couple of months. In the case of Durango, his had become attached to him to the point where few people actually knew or remembered that his true name was Miguel.

I saw very little of Durango during my first several weeks living on the farm, in the early spring. We worked apart, with Durango on the planting crew, and his crew had been putting in a great deal of extra hours on the mechanised planter, typically working until 9 at night, in a final push to get all the saplings in the ground before the spring rains ended. We usually only saw each other in the mornings, typically sitting together at the kitchen table as we ate our respective breakfasts, sharing our weather predictions for the day or complaining about how it had been unusually hot in our bunk-house bedrooms the preceding night.

### **Planting, Staking, Budding, Pruning**

Meanwhile, I was on Eulogio's staking team for the better part of the spring. The task we collectively called 'staking' was a lengthy process, and completing the roughly 600 acres of farmland would take most of the spring and summer.

Groesbeck Farms is in the business of growing decorative deciduous and evergreen trees to be sold wholesale to garden centres and eventually ending up on front lawns in suburban Ontario and Quebec. Although some minor work takes place in the greenhouses during the spring, the majority of labour takes place in the fields, and a growing season on the farm could for the most part be divided into four main types of work: planting, budding, staking, and pruning.

A work season would begin in early spring with the planting of new saplings, then as spring progressed, the ‘staking’ of second-year trees would occur, lasting until mid-summer. Then, the ‘budding’ task of grafting domesticated varieties onto the ‘wild’ trees planted in the spring of the previous year would take place from mid-summer until early Fall. Meanwhile, the job of pruning the third-year and forth-year trees would occur periodically throughout spring, summer, and fall. Thus, it was a four-year process to grow a tree from sapling and prepare it for the marketplace.

To explain this process in a slightly more detailed and chronological fashion, growing a tree that is both aesthetically pleasing and able to withstand the rigors of the Canadian environment consists of a multitude of steps carried out over several years. Beginning in the spring, teams would plant ‘wild’ saplings – that is, non-domesticated, hardy saplings that can tolerate the cold Canadian winter. In late August of the same year of their planting, once the saplings had taken root and had a chance to grow several inches, workers would graft a piece of a domesticated variety of tree from the same species onto the base of the trunk of the wild sapling. Once winter had passed, in early spring of the next year, other workers would cut off the trunk of this sapling above where the domesticated bud had been grafted and dispose of it, leaving only the stump of this

wild tree and the graft behind. This stump would act as the base for the domesticated, grafted tree, which, no longer having to compete with the original trunk of the tree for water and nutrients, would be able to quickly grow up to several feet in a single year, and be ready for the market in three. This is how a non-native variety of tree, such as the Royal Red Maple, which usually does not endure well in the Canadian environment, once grafted onto the hardier root-stalk of the indigenous Sugar Maple, is not only able to survive but thrive in the Canadian climate as a colourful and aesthetically pleasing tree.

### **Alienated Labour?**

As such, if one considers the finished product of one's labour the tree which is ready for market, then it is rather difficult to find a connection or source of pride in this finished product. As described above, the process of growing a decorative tree takes over four years and dozens of steps fulfilled by a multitude of workers over many seasons to produce. "Degrees of alienation are greatest where the worker has negligible control over the value and the disposition of his product, least where he initiates the work effort, organise time, place, person – all the elements of the work process, and can identify with the product and the values of the product" (Wallman 1979: 17).

However, most workers had found alternate ways to develop satisfaction, achievement, even pride in other facets of their work, and had innovated more readily available sources of connection to their labour that went beyond a connection to the stated physical product of their labours, the market-ready trees. A completed field or a good day of work came to be what workers valued, and this satisfaction in a day's labour was how they were able to claim their labour and make the work 'their own'. Thus, what was seen as the product of the work was re-defined by the workers themselves – the

product was not the trees themselves but the more tangible and immediate results of a day's labour.

This process, of making one's labour one's own, is most evident in a discussion of the task of 'staking', and the important role of 'hole-poker'. This task of staking was seen by the migrant workers as *the* pivotal project on the farm. And one part of this project was the role of 'hole-maker' – agreed upon by the Mexican migrant workers as simply the one most important task which a worker on the farm could accomplish: A job to which Durango was soon to find himself promoted.

### **Staking, or How to Turn Rows of Trees into Fields of Metal Poles**

The job of staking was a four-part process which followed several weeks after the wild trunk of a sapling had been cut away, leaving the bud (which, by this time, was growing into a "shoot") and stump behind. The job required four workers: a "cleaner", a "hole-maker", a "staker", and a "tie-guy". Essentially, the end goal of this collective task was to insert an eight-foot-long metal rod, known as a "stake", into the ground next to each growing sapling, and secure the sapling to this support pole with plastic ribbon.

One man, the "cleaner" would "clean" the stumps of the young trees to be staked. This meant cutting off the wild shoots growing out of the stump with pruning shears and leaving the domesticated sapling that had been grafted onto the stump in the previous season. Afterwards, the "hole-maker" would poke a hole into the ground roughly about 12 inches deep, near the base of the sapling, using a T-shaped bar that had been put together in the farm's machine shop by perpendicularly welding a two-foot section of metal pipe onto a 3-foot galvanised steel rod that ended in a sharp spike. Following him, a "staker" would place an eight-foot long metal support pole into this freshly made hole.



Finally, completing the process, the “tie-guy” would secure the sapling to the pole with a staple-gun device that wrapped a short length of ribbon around tree-trunk and pole, attaching the ends of said ribbon with a staple. These four workers would form an assembly-line-like chain in a row of trees, collectively working down the length of the row until it had been completed.

The purpose of this seemingly simple collection of tasks was to ensure that the decorative trees, supported by these metal poles, would grow tall and straight throughout the season. Aesthetics on the farm was measured to a point of almost mathematical perfection, as consumers, and thus the employer, demanded perfection. A decorative tree that did not have a smooth, even trunk that stood at a perfect upwards 90 degree angle to the ground, as I was told by the members of my work-crew, would end up in the burn pit rather than the market place.

Work crews were typically informally assembled for most tasks on the farm, and this was no exception. On my work-crew, Eulogio, a migrant worker who had been returning to the farm for twelve years, was considered the de-facto foreman, and had selected several migrant workers and myself for his team once he had been assigned this long task of staking. Our crew would work our ten-hour days in the assembly-line fashion I described above, in groups of three men per row, along with a tie-guy working in both rows. A cleaner would be followed by the hole-maker, while a stake-man, holding a bushel of metal poles retrieved from a nearby trailer loaded with a day’s worth of poles, would follow shortly behind. Meanwhile, since the job of tie-guy could be done faster than any of the other positions, the tie-guy would work in two rows simultaneously. A

well-organised team such as our own could expect to complete about 1 ½ to 2 acres of field per ten hour work-day, or about 250 trees per hour.

This collection of tasks had an informal hierarchy. The least desirable position, the cleaner, involved maintaining an awkward and eventually painful stooped position, as one laboriously shuffled down the rows, crouched down while cleaning the stumps positioned on the ground between one's feet. As such, it was generally ascribed to first-year workers or to informally "punish" certain individuals.

Second in ranking was the stake-man. It was a relatively more comfortable job than cleaning since it involved standing upright for the day, and it did not require an abundance of technical skill. It did, however, involve carrying arm-loads of heavy metal poles heaved on one's shoulder for the day, and the staker had a choice – wear hot gloves and let one's hands swim in puddles of sweat, or go bare-palmed while letting the friction of pushing down pole after pole into the ground slowly wear away the skin on one's hand.

Thirdly in this hierarchy was the tie-guy, which required quick hands and the technical knowledge of how to work the tie-gun to properly secure trees to their accompanying metal support poles. It was light work that wasn't hard on the body, and since it required a variety of movements and positions, the tie-guy wouldn't be overly stiff or sore in any particular spot at day's end. The disadvantage of this position was that the tie-guy was typically separated from the rest of the crew, working several meters behind the group. This meant that he missed out on the entertainment of the day's conversations, and rather worked in tedious solitude.

## **The Hole-Maker: The Artisan of the Staking Crew**

The key position, though, the job which was of paramount importance to this mission, was that of the hole-maker. The only way for a tree to grow perfectly straight would be if the hole-maker succeeded in inserting the spike of his T-bar in the ground at the ideal 90 degree angle and poking his T-bar to the required depth. Only once this vital task had been achieved would it be possible for the metal stake to enter the ground in the appropriate direction, allowing for the soon-to-be attached tree to grow flawlessly and magnificently vertical.

However, there were several hundred thousand trees which needed to be staked in a relatively small time frame. A hole-maker would have to be quick, yet consistent in his craft. It was a challenging job, and it highlighted a crucial contradiction on the farm: there was a demand for workers (both from the farm-owner, but as will be explained, this demand was also greatly from the workers themselves) to provide both a rapid, yet high quality job; this paradox between the imperative of attaining a superior aesthetic quality and the obligation for hasty labour permeated life on the farm. Thus, this position carried a lot of responsibility, and it was a position occupied only by veteran workers who had at least several years of experience, as well as a good eye.

The job did have its benefits, however. Since hole-poking took less time than cleaning, hole-makers had ample opportunity to take small pauses to leisurely chat with their fellow hole-maker in their neighbouring row while the cleaners scrambled in the dirt ahead of them, trying to make some headway in the day's task.

## **The Experiences of Staking: Eulogio's Crew**

By mid June, I had been serving on Eulogio's team for several weeks, the only Canadian on his crew. He and Nicolas, two of the more experienced migrant workers, with 12 and 9 years working on the farm respectively, were making holes, while Eulogio had his first-year workers, Julio, Agosto, Martin, as well as myself, alternating between the tasks of staking and cleaning. By having us switch positions around every few hours, we were assured that none of us would have a back that ached more than another, which was something of an act of kindness on Eulogio's part. Meanwhile, Mene was far behind our group, the sound of his tie-gun clicking away in the forest of metal we were busily planting.

Eulogio, both a consummate perfectionist and something of a despot in his role as crew foreman, kept a careful eye on our workmanship.

As I followed behind him with the weight of thirty-or-so metal poles crushing down on my shoulder, he glanced back, checking the straightness of the poles in the row in which he was hole-making.

"Hey! - Don't fuck up my holes! Don't you fuck up my work!" He snarled a curt warning at me in Spanish.

"They look fine to me..."

"Keep it that way!"

Just then, a large Kubota tractor rumbled by our field, slowing down just long enough for the figure hanging off the side to jump off before it accelerated and rumbled into the distance. The newcomer, Durango, approached us and explained to Eulogio that

planting was finished, and that he had been instructed to work with us. Eulogio promptly assigned him as a staker, relegating me to the position of cleaner.

Days passed. Over the following week, we were able to make exceptionally good progress in our task, while alternating positions, keeping 2 stakers and 3 cleaners in the ranks. In only one week, we had completed 15 acres of Sugar Maple, and had moved on to the Red Rubrums. Victories were often small on the farm, and the changing of one type of tree for another, an ocean of red replacing one of green, was one such victory.

Durango continued to alternate with the others and myself as staker and cleaner on our team over these days. So far, in the two years that he worked on the farm, he was content to locate his identity in other facets of his life, and defined himself in relation to his family and friendships on the farm; seeing himself as a “farm-worker” was a minor part of his total identity. This would change the day that Eulogio was taken off our staking team, and Durango had to assume the heavy responsibility which was the province of the hole-maker.

To reiterate thus far: I have discussed how the workers had constructed a hierarchy of status based on the levels of comfort and technical skill associated with each role in the collective task of staking. As I have explained, at the hub of this collection of tasks was that of the hole-maker. The realisation of a successful day’s work circled around the hole-maker’s ability to create straight and accurate holes in a quick and efficient manner. It was his abilities which would allow the whole team to complete the geometric beauty of a properly staked field. A task which, for an outsider peering in, would appear as simply poking a hole in the dirt, had been elevated to a certain level of prestige among the migrant workers. In fact, a particular mythology had developed

around the position of hole-maker, a mythology that was further perpetrated and elaborated on by those who occupied this elite position.

Not only was this task the centre of work on the farm, but to successfully realise proper holes required - in addition to strength, precision, and hand-eye co-ordination - a combination of technical knowledge and intuition about the soil composition, the type of trees being staked, and even how wet the earth underfoot was. The level of moisture in the soil, the amount and thickness of the roots of the trees being worked on, the softness or presence of rocks in the earth, could all have an effect on how much force and precision a hole-maker would have to use in order to avoid having the T-bar penetrate the ground too deeply, or ricochet off of a hard root or stone: These were the elements of the task which made the job of creating a uniform and flawlessly staked field difficult.

This combination of technical skill and near-cabalistic qualities of intuition required for this job were what made those who occupied this position of hole-maker part of a very elite group indeed.

### **The Day of Durango's Promotion**

On the morning that Durango was to become a hole-maker, I had been cleaning in Nicolas's row; my lower back burned fiercely, and I was already looking forward to our fifteen-minute break that was still an hour away. Mene, although too far behind the rest of the crew to engage in conversation, was occasionally yelling out one of his trade-mark nonsensical, irrelevant phrases in a high-pitched, cartoonish voice, perhaps his own personal way of forestalling the alienating effects of his work. Today, since it was pay-day, he had adopted as his expression "*Checky-Cheque-te-queiro!*" ["Checky-Cheque-I-

want-you!"]]. Tomorrow, after our weekly grocery shopping trip into town, he would be punctuating the still air with "*Checky-Cheque-te-fuiste!*" ["Checky-Check-you-left-me!"]]

We hear the growling rumble of Han's diesel-fuelled Ford F-150 in the distance. A forbidding silence falls over the crew. Although we had been working at a steady pace, we begin to work just a bit harder; pressing on with increased deliberation. No matter how tired we may be, Hans' physical presence had an uncanny effect of tyrannically inspiring an increased effort in his work-force. I shuffle from tree stump to tree stump with renewed vigour and precision, while silently praying that Hans will not step out of his truck and inspect my work. The healthy graft I had accidentally snipped in my row an hour ago lay wilting on the ground, evidence of a mistake that would subject me to his wrathful temper.

Fortunately though, as he rolls the pickup to the head of our row, he remains in the driver's seat, turning the engine off so we could hear his shout, "Eulogio! You're coming with me, you're tying with Richard now!"

Eulogio, understanding enough English to comprehend Hans' request, shoves his poker into the dirt and jogs towards the truck, picking up the thread-bare backpack that contains his mid-morning break's snack along the way. Meanwhile, the familiar silhouette of Hector-Alberto, clad in his summer work uniform of tan shorts and an old white T-shirt with the logo "Belmont Marina" written across the front, exits the truck and walks towards us.

As he approaches, Martin, crouched and cleaning frantically in the dirt in the row next to me, whispers out an exasperated swear in Spanish, "Ah...not that fuckin' fag!"

Nicolas looks up from his task, focuses his stare at the newcomer, and pauses momentarily before punching his T-bar back into the dry earth, his snarling lip parting slightly to reveal several metal teeth.

It is Hector's first year on the farm, and in the nearly four months he has been working here, he has made far more enemies than friends among the other migrant workers, with some perturbed by his often eccentric behaviour, and others unsure about his sexual orientation. Apparently oblivious to the loathing of Nicolas and Martin, Hector-Alberto, with his typically up-beat ear-to-ear smile, speaking in the formal and polite manner which played a part in making him detested on the farm, exclaims with enthusiasm, "Good day sirs! I'm here to replace Don Eulogio – what can I do?".

With Eulogio gone, Nicolas, with 8 years of tenure on the farm, is now the default foreman. As Hans' truck roars off into the distance, Nicolas stabs his T-bar deep into the ground for dramatic effect, and takes a moment of silence to glare at the team's new addition. Nicolas has been Hector-Alberto's primary nemesis on the farm. On most occasions, he would abhor having to work with him, but now, he clearly sees the advantages of the present power dynamics between the two. "Clean...", he snarls, "In my row", nodding with his head. Over the coming weeks, under Nicolas's command, Hector will not feel his back straighten during his 10 hour work days.

Nicolas, now the sole hole-poker with a team of six men under him, knows that he will have to appoint someone as the second hole-poker to replace Eulogio if we want to get the field completed. Choosing this new hole-poker is a delicate task: Nicolas, as the new foreman and most experienced man on the field now, will now be held responsible for any mistakes that happen under his watch. His choice, however, is clear from the



start. He and Durango have become good friends, and he has come to be something of a gruff mentor to the younger worker. He trusts Durango's workmanship, and is willing to adopt him into this role, which, while requiring greater responsibility than the jobs of cleaner or staker, is also, as I have explained, a less physically burdensome position.

"Durango, you're doing holes now."

Durango, who had been following Nicolas with a bundle of stakes, looks up from his task. "Huh? But... But I don't know how!"

The steely comportment Nicolas had maintained during his exchange with Hector dissolves as he addresses Durango.

"Come here, watch." Nicolas begins a quick yet patient demonstration with his poker, "You make sure it's nice and straight," levelling his hole-poker to the ground "And...Like this.", he slowly pushes the poker into the ground. "See? Like that" He steps forward, his actions a bit faster, and pokes another hole into the ground "Like that. " He pokes a third hole. "Got it?"

"Yeah, yeah, alright." Durango says, sounding rather unsure of himself. He hands me his bundle of steel rods, and retrieves the T-bar that Eulogio had thrust into the ground, and commences where the former foreman had left off.

Despite the gravity accorded to the position of hole-maker, the apprenticeship is limited to these several short moments of tutorial. Being a good hole-maker depends more on intuition than instruction, on practice rather than study. If Durango doesn't grasp the concept of how to make a good hole quickly, he will be ridiculed for his inferior craftsmanship and replaced by another, perhaps more competent, more intuitive worker.

Slowly, nervously, Durango steadies the T-bar, steadies himself, hesitates, and then finally pushes the poker into the ground. Pulling it out of the earth, he steps forward, takes in a deep, nervous breath, and repeats the process twice more. Stepping back, he waits for me to stake his three holes. I slide the metal support poles into each of the foot-deep holes he has made in the hard, dry dirt. His usual loud, boisterous voice has been replaced with a quiet, sheepish tone. “Are they very crooked?”

“Yeah, not too crooked. A bit crooked to the left,” I reply.

He studies the inclination of the stakes I’ve just inserted for a moment, turns around, and pokes holes next to four more saplings. Not waiting for me to complete my share of the task, he grabs two poles from my hand and thrusts them into his freshly made punctures as I fill the other two.

He steps back once more, concentrating with a furrowed brow, he chews the tip of a thumb while scrutinising his handiwork. Nodding and grumbling to himself, he resumes his position, and begins carefully poking holes in his row.

There are no bad jokes or elaborate stories from Durango today – he is lost in a world of concentration, where his only comments are when he turns to seek reassurance from me, “How are they? Not too crooked, eh?” Meanwhile, as the morning and afternoon wear on, Nicolas maintains a lead of at least a dozen meters in front of us, pushing in holes with ease and confidence bred from years of practice.

That evening, after we all had our turn in the shower and on the stoves, and had cleaned and fed ourselves, several of us sit in the bunkhouse’s living room, mindlessly watching some prime-time sitcoms. Durango, slumping on the worn brown couch next to me, stares at the television with distracted, glazed eyes, looked completely and utterly

drained. Nearly 10 hours of poking holes have had a devastating effect on him, both physically and mentally. After a long period of silence, he tears his unblinking eyes off the T.V., and rolls his head in my direction to make eye contact. "...My rows...", he slurs, "...they're not perfect, but not too bad...". I nod in agreement, and he rolls his head back towards the television.

### **Living up to the Standards**

The workers of Groesbeck Farms would not necessarily agree to the statement that "[i]n work [the worker] does not belong to himself but to another person" (Marx 1964: 125). As I had mentioned earlier, the migrant workers on Groesbeck Farms were able to add levels of symbolic value to certain tasks and elevate these tasks far beyond the mere "unskilled" manual labour that these undertakings may be perceived as by outsiders. As such, these tasks became a source of pride and a locus to invest one's identity that went beyond any connection to the product of the labour.

A certain mythology had sprung around the task of hole-maker, to the point where it was seen as the paramount position of importance on the farm, the task which preceded all other farm jobs in importance. If this job was done poorly, then all other tasks on the farm would ultimately fail. The hole-makers themselves elevated this process from a simple physical action into a sort of craftsmanship, an art-form which required total concentration and co-operation of body and mind. Durango, as he came struggled to become a hole-maker, was aware of this pre-existing mythology, and the great steps he had to take in order to be worthy of this role weigh heavily upon him. As Wallman observes, "[s]pecialisation on any basis is both a bind and a privilege. The right to work

at a particular task fixes both identity and livelihood – however lowly the task or meagre the livelihood it provides” (1979:13).

The next several days passed routinely. We would congregate in the farm’s main parking lot at 7:15, as usual, and Nicolas would locate an available tractor in the bunker which he and Augusto would hook up to a trailer, while Durango and Mene retrieved the T-bars and tying supplies from the garage. Then, we would load the equipment and ourselves into the trailer, and, with Nicolas in the tractor driver’s seat, we would drive off into the labyrinth of dirt roads criss-crossing the farmland, off to another field to stake.

Meanwhile, as the myriad other tasks of spring became completed, the farm owner had assembled a second crew of stakers, composed of a mix of Mexican, local workers, and several high school students employed for the summer.

On our own team, I had become Durango’s ad-hoc full-time staker, while Durango himself was becoming more confident and self-assured in his new role over the passing days, checking his own work and asking for my opinion on the quality of his craftsmanship less and less frequently.

Hector-Alberto remained the full-time cleaner for Nicolas, who continued to delight in this chance to provoke his opponent, routinely criticising him and admonishing him for any mistakes he made and his overall slowness and ineptness. That is, until one morning, his lower back and spirit finally having had enough, Hector “ran away” from our crew, jumping on the trailer of Richard’s stake crew as it rode out of the lot one morning. No one made much mention about his shift of team alliances– While Nicolas had enjoyed his time aggravating Hector, he began to tire of his game and the general

annoyance he felt from this first-year worker, while the other staking team welcomed the extra pair of hands.

During lunch hours, we would return to our respective bunk houses to eat. The lunch hour was a special time. There was a certain level of competition that was present in all tasks on the farm – competition between work crews, competition amongst work crews, to do the fastest and highest quality of work. Although this competition was frequently unspoken throughout the working hours, the lunch hour was the one time when the workers of each respective bunk house would come together and have a chance to complain about workers from the other two bunk houses, brag about their own working skills, or talk about the technical details related to their jobs. Although this opportunity existed, few people took advantage of it to the extent which Eulogio and Goyo did. Seated around the long picnic table in the lunch room, we would typically eat in silence while Eulogio and Goyo, seated across from one another in the centre of the table, loudly discussed the various technicalities of their jobs: how the fields were getting too dry and that Hans needed to get some workers to set up more irrigation equipment, how the Canadian foreman Richard didn't know what he was doing and had to always ask for Eulogio's help, how badly team X had staked a field, and so on. These discussions, while being on the one hand expressions of elements of farm-life that did actually interest the two men, were also subtle ways to inform and reinforce ideas about Eulogio's and Goyo's positions in the farm's hierarchy, their level of technical knowledge, and the fact that they were, due to their knowledge and interest in farm matters, in possession of the honourable trait of a good work ethic.

One day, quite surprisingly, Durango decided to join in on this conversation, “You know, we were in the Rubrums today. I was having a hard time making holes there, lots of fuckin’ thick roots”.

“Yeah”, Eulogio acknowledged him, “Those trees, that type, they always got lots of roots. You think that was bad, though, you gotta see the chock cherries, where we’re at. That fuckin’ garbage is more roots than soil!”

From here on, Durango became an active member of the lunch-hour’s work-related conversations, as he and his co-workers discussed the various intricacies and technicalities of the job of hole-poker: soil composition, which areas of the farm fields had softer dirt, the tree species with denser root networks; all points of importance for the veteran hole-poker, all of which had an impact on his task of making a perfectly vertical hole. These conversations often bordered between boasting and actual transfers of knowledge related to the task.

“Yeah, today we’re in the Troy Sugars – it’s real dry there, like concrete. But I still managed to get, like, 4 rows done this morning.”

“Ah, that’s nothing like where we’re at. Pure fuckin’ rock it is! And doesn’t help that I’m working with a bunch of idiots...But you know what you do, you get some tying ribbon from the shop and wrap it ‘round your T-bar’s handle...It’ll save your hands when you’re poking that fuckin’ rock.”

At first, Durango felt humbled by the experience of becoming a hole-maker, and his usual, rowdy work-time chats had vanished from the fields, replaced by a quieter, more focused version of the man we knew. But slowly, as he learned the techniques and secrets of his new position, Durango’s boisterous nature gradually returned to him. After

about two weeks of having been promoted to hole-poker, he asks a loaded question to Eulogio during one their lunch-hour tech-talks, “So, how many rows you guys do this morning?”

“Ah, ‘bout four, more or less.”

“Four?” Durango’s lips curl into a mischievous grin, “You guys only got four done? Us, we finished five already- and we only got seven guys. You guys, you’re ten – what’s going on, buddy?”

Eulogio takes this affront seriously. Lowering the rolled-up tortilla from his mouth, he looks up from his plate, narrowing his eyes in an icy glare across the table towards Durango. “Shut up!” he snarls, dismissing the comment before launching into his tirade “We’ve got a bunch of fuckin’ Canadians. And Alberto (*on the farm, Hector-Alberto was referred to by his second name*), that fuckin’ guy’s slow – And Belinda, shit! She never cleans, just wants to stake. And when she does, she spends half of the time talking to Ashley. Son of a whore! A lot of talking, not a lot of working!” Goyo, his cheeks stuffed with food, nods in agreement.

Canadian workers, according to Eulogio, did not take the task of staking as seriously as such an undertaking deserved – a fact that both distressed Eulogio and caused his mixed team to embarrassingly lag behind, and a point that he expressed often in the bunkhouse away from where Canadian ears might hear him.

Several days later, after yet another productive day in the field, Durango and I sit in the bunkhouse living room. It has been two and a half weeks since Durango had been promoted to the position of hole-maker. In contrast to the bleary, haggard figure that had been slouched in the same seat seventeen days prior, Durango is vigorous and energetic,

recounting his day to Guadeloupe and I with vivid eyes and animated hands. “Yeah, I had it today! Alejandro was with us this morning, right... He came and poked some holes with us in the morning, but that guy’s all talk, going on about that he’s the man. His stakes were all crooked, not like mine!... Eh, I was the man today!”

Old Manual enters, and stands in the doorway of the living room.

“Yeah? I passed a field coming back just now. Hmmprh! ...Pure garbage, that’s what it was. There were stakes going every friggin’ which-way!” To accentuate his point, Manual slashes his hands with disgust through the air while talking, illustrating the obscene angles of the support poles he had recently witnessed.

“Ah?...Well they weren’t my work, that’s for sure. I was even straighter than Nico today. I was on top of it today like no one’s business!”

### **Some Concluding Comments: Hole-Making as neither Subversion nor Acquiesce**

Having worked with Durango, and seeing his developing pride and competitive nature emerging in his role of hole-poker, I would find myself disagreeing with Marx’s argument that “[w]ork is *external* to the worker. . . . It is not part of his nature; consequently he does not fulfil himself in his work but denies himself. . . . The worker therefore feels himself at home only during his leisure time, whereas at work he feels homeless” (Mark 1964: 124-125). Rather, it would seem that Durango, once he got over the initial challenges of the position, was rather able to use his work as a source of satisfaction and purpose, something from which he derived a great sense of achievement.

The mythology of the hole-maker being the central, most significant position on the farm was exactly that, a myth. Taken out of the context accorded to this task by the



migrant workers themselves, the task of hole-poking was a required element on the farm, but hardly needed to become a specialised skill. While making sure that the metal poles were roughly perpendicular to the ground and that the trees were properly secured to these supports was necessary, the truth is that the workers' concerns and concentration on aesthetic perfection had minimal effect on the finished product of a decorative tree. After a tree had spent its four years on Groesbeck Farms, and had been unearthed, the position at which the trunk stood in relation to the ground becomes inconsequential. Ultimately, a perfectly straight, upright tree depends more on the customer properly planting it after purchase than the initial angle at which it grew while on the farm.

These workers had created and invested in their own systems of meaning, imbuing one set of work practices with value, finding ways to make this work practice valuable for themselves, in-and-of itself. This was neither a rebellion against the market-oriented goals of the farm nor a reflection of some emotional investment in the Groesbeck business on the part of the migrant workers. While not actually subverting the power structures that these migrant workers operated within, neither did this redefinition of their work run perfectly parallel to the overarching objectives of these power structures. In fact, the perfectionist attitude and fastidious concern for detail that Durango, Eulogio, Nicolas, and the other hole-pokers demonstrated and encouraged within their elite group actually slowed down the entire process of staking, perhaps making it so that the task took three months to complete as opposed to two. A monotonous task, combined with an employer's laissez-faire management style has come together to allow for a unique set of circumstances and a creative redistribution of value.

Rosaldo *et al* (1993) point out that creativity has been associated with the exceptional, occurring on the fringes of social life. Yet, Rosaldo *et al* continue, creativity can occur, and most often does occur, within the prosaic and everyday just as much as within the poetic and extraordinary, if not more. Perhaps in the back of their minds, these workers knew that their considerable attention to the task at hand and the end-results of their labours were rather trivial. But this did not change the pride which Durango developed in becoming a hole-maker. In fact, this elevation of the hole-poker represents a rather creative and innovative process. A seemingly simple task – poking holes in the dirt – had come to be re-defined by the workers to the point where this particular task had become the most crucial and complicated task on the farm. The Mexican work crews have made hole-making their own – not a simple part of the production process but the primary goal – a source of identification rather than alienation.

In this case, workers have taken a rather inconsequential task and promoted it to something extremely meaningful and important in their own lives. “[E]ven little people in the routine and the everyday construct their lives as they live their lives” (Bruner 1993 :321).

## Chapter 5

### Hector-Alberto and Finding Ways to be at Home through Photos

An authentically migrant perspective would, perhaps, be based on an intuition that the opposition between here and there is itself a cultural construction, a consequence of thinking in terms of fixed entities and defining them oppositionally. It might begin by regarding movement, not as an awkward interval between fixed points of departure and arrival, but as a mode of being in the world. The question would be, then, not how to arrive, but how to move, how to identify convergent and divergent movements; and the challenge would be how to notate such events, how to give them a historical and social value (Carter 1992: 101).



*"This is Brandon Fraser. My daughter loves Brandon Fraser. He's in the Mummy movie."*

-Hector-Alberto,  
explaining a picture of a mannequin  
taken outside of a wax museum in  
Niagara Falls

A basic assumption is that migration is 'about' searching for a better life (Olwig and Sorensen 2002), or, along the same lines, a search for an improved 'quality of life' (Kearney 1986). In the previous chapter, I have argued that a Marxist approach to work neglects the meanings which workers ascribe to their products themselves. In a similar path, by examining migration only with its economic motives and goals in mind, we do not see the myriad meanings which migrants create during these transnational circuits. As

Olwig and Sorensen point out, the fact that migration is often undertaken for such economic-based reasons does not mean that experiences of migration should be primarily explained via an economic framework; they instead call for an enhanced appreciation of the experiences of migration by highlighting “mobile livelihoods”, or how people make a living while on the move (2002: 3). The authors continue that while there has been a concentration of studies on the social institutions and networks which facilitate migration and on the large-scale patterns of these population movements, we ought to engage in broader investigation of the “migrant experience”, to look beyond the idea of transnational migration as simply physical movements across national boundaries, but rather as groupings of processes with profound and diverse meanings to those involved.

Circular migratory labour represents a quality of labour and of life different from that of the worker who labours in his/her community of origin or adoption. A migrant worker may financially benefit from his time away from home, but is also separated from family and placed in a set of unique circumstances, and potentially finds his or her “home” fundamentally altered upon return. In fact, the term circular migration is somewhat inappropriate, for it implies a returning, a ‘going back to’. Chambers insists that migratory processes are part of a linear rather than circular process, so that even the migrant engaged in ‘circular migration’ finds that no returns are possible (1994). The experience of migration changes conceptions of home, so that the home the migrant returns to is constructed differently than the one he left. “(R)eturning home is not to find oneself in the same place as before” (Amit and Rapport 2002: 33).

Is this to say that migrants such those in the Seasonal Agricultural Workers’ program are to find themselves homeless, not just while in Canada, but permanently,

even when they return to their places of origin? “Historically, it was only the elite global capitalist class who had collective ‘homes away from home’ while others were merely sojourners” (Wong 2002: 170). Perhaps it may be that they find a way to redefine their own conceptions of home, finding unique and innovative ways of “being at home in the world” (Jackson 2000).

These migratory processes allow us the opportunity to question and challenge preconceived notions of “home”. The idea of “home” has been commonly thought of as a singular concept; rooted in the conception of one fixed physical home (Rapport and Dawson 1998), while migration literature has fortified this conception through the use of binary oppositions, through the pairing and contrasting of themes such as: ‘origin’ and ‘destination’; ‘immigrant’ and ‘native’; ‘push’ and ‘pull’; ‘sending’ and ‘receiving’ countries, and has achieved the same effect with notions of ‘home’ and ‘away’ (Wong 2002).

Rouse (1991) uses the term “transnational migratory circuits” to describe the world’s multi-directional flow of people and goods, and his own work on Mexican migrants points out that an analysis of such circuits allows for a redefinition of these binary classifications of home and away. While the flows of goods and people within these circuits are relatively easy to observe, it much harder to observe the flows and traffic of meanings happening within these processes.

To return to Olwig and Sorensen, they argue that a migrant rarely ‘leaves’ his or her place of origin, at least not cognitively or emotionally. Migration is not a matter of *dis-placement*, but rather *multi-placement*, in that migrants often maintain ties to the places that they left (Olwig and Sorensen 2002). It is within this “expansion of space”

(Ibid), this area which bridges between where an individual resides physically and where they dwell emotionally and cognitively, where individuals have the opportunities to re-define conceptions of home.

I wish now to discuss one Mexican migrant, Hector-Alberto - who I have briefly introduced in the prologue and the previous chapter- who had physically left his place of origin to come and work in Canada. Yet, his thoughts, considerations, memories, and plans for the future still remain there, firmly entrenched. His feelings of ‘multi-placement’ could be used to argue that his is a case which attests to the logic of the dichotomy of ‘home’ and ‘away’. Rather, I argue that his time away allowed him to re-ascribe the social relations to which he attributed great importance as being his “home” rather than the physical locale whence he came. So, this present chapter focuses on Hector-Alberto, and how he and I came to know each other. At the same time, the chapter shows how he was able to forge his own transnational ties while acting as a migrant worker in Canada, and how, in the process, he was able to find himself “at home in the world” (Jackson 2000) by way of a small, inexpensive digital camera.

### **A First Day of Work, and a First Meeting with Hector**

Hector-Alberto and I met the morning of my first day at work on Groesbeck Farms.

The actions of this morning would soon become routine over the course of the next three months. The other residents of the migrant workers’ bunkhouse where I stay, known as *la casa rojo* (the Red House) begin to put on their boots and hats at ten minutes after seven in the morning. I follow suit, and walk with the group of ten men as they leave the bunkhouse, cross the small road running through the village of Elmsdale, and

enter the farm's large main parking lot. Already in the lot are members of the other two bunk-houses, *la casa azul* (the Blue House) and *la casa de piedra* (the Stone House). Here, as it would be with most of the work days to follow, we wait for the farm owner, Hans, to arrive and issue our working orders for the day.

During this time, this awkward five minutes preceding the start of my first work day, I stare down at my soon-to-be dirtied work boots, shuffle the dirt and gravel, and nervously ponder how the next three months of field work, and working in the field, are going to unfold. I glance around; the twenty-or-so Mexican men standing about in the wide parking lot seem lost in their own thoughts, some have only recently awoken and are rubbing the sleep out of their eyes, while a trio leaning up against the gas and diesel pumps near the machine shop make small-talk before their day begins. The majority do the same as I—stare down at their boots, and kick idly at the dirt.

As I glance at these faces around me, one man several metres away establishes eye contact with me, and approaches. He wears the standard blue coveralls that all the migrant workers on the farm wear in the cool spring, along with a dusty base-ball cap with the company name, *Groesbeck Farms*, embroidered in proud italic lettering across the front, and a wide, nylon kidney-belt, complete with black elastic suspender straps. This worker has attached a plethora of paraphernalia to this belt: his worn leather holster houses the company-issued red-handled pruning shears, a wristwatch hangs off one of the adjustment straps, below a small compass. He had found ways to attach a pair of vice-grips and his work-gloves along the other side of this belt, along with a small knife. As he nears me, he outstretches his arm, offering his hand in greeting, while a wide, welcoming smile spreads across his clean-shaven face, revealing two rows of straight, white teeth.

“Hello, I wanted to take this opportunity to introduce myself,” he grasps my hand firmly and pumps it twice vigorously, “My name is Hector,” he greets me, in a flawless English tinged with a heavy Mexican accent.

I briefly return my own introduction, just as, timed to near perfection at twenty-five minutes past seven, a handful of cars containing the Canadian workers enter from one side of the parking lot, while Hans’ diesel-fuelled Ford F-150 roars in through the other end of the lot. Within five minutes, the Canadian workers have jumped from their cars, the employer has quickly assigned the day's tasks to several of the foremen and driven away, and these foremen have speedily recruited handfuls of workers to labour on these tasks. A Canadian foreman, Phil, instructs Hector, myself, and a mixture of Canadian and Mexican workers to join him in the company’s grey van.

We pile in, and we receive a brief outline of the day’s work from Phil as he shifts the van into drive and pulls out of the parking lot and onto the main street of Elmsdale. We are going to the far side of the farm, about a fifteen minute drive away, to prune a few acres of maple.

During the short ride, the other Canadian workers introduce themselves to me. Ashley and Beth are two girls from the local town in their early twenties, while Harry and Phil are both in their mid-30’s. Everyone but Phil has only been working on the farm for several months, while our foreman has twelve years of experience at Groesbeck’s. The several men clad in blue coveralls sitting at the back of the van are silent, so I introduce myself to them. They seem surprised to hear a Canadian speaking Spanish. Leobardo, Julio, along with Hector, are all first-year workers on the farm While it is Hector’s first



year in Canada, both Julio and Leobardo have had several years on different farms, and they have both had a year working in tomatoes in Leamington.

The van leaves the paved street of the village of Elmsdale and turns onto a dirt road, one of the many criss-crossing the farm's acreage, linking the many fields. We roll to a stop in front of one such field, and exit the van.

I am the last to get out, and I slam the door closed behind me. The Canadians have already started walking towards the field, with their mid-morning snack bags in hand. Meanwhile, Hector stands next to me, reaches into the breast pocket of his overalls, and removes a small object wrapped in a soft, grey cloth. He carefully unwraps this package, revealing a small red plastic digital camera, which he switches on. Raising his voice, he calls out in English to the group walking away from him, "Hey! Can I take your picture, please?"

Ashley looks back, and in mock frustration, laments, "Oh, Alberto, not another picture!"

Hector-Alberto grins and snaps a photo of the Canadian workers walking towards the field.



Hector and I work in neighbouring rows for most of the morning, trimming back the branches of two-year saplings to ensure that these trees would grow primarily vertically rather than bushing outwards. He seems eager to have someone to speak with in English, and, when he mispronounces a word or stumbles on an expression, he repeats what would be one of his common expressions, “I need practice my English”. Over the course of the morning, I inform him about my research project and about one of the additional reasons I am here on the farm – to act as an English-as-a-second-language tutor to the Mexican migrant workers. He enthusiastically says he will come to this evening’s class. While we snip our way through hundreds of branches, I ask him about his family back home. His youngest, Cynthia, has just turned three years old a few weeks ago, while Samantha, at eleven years old, is finishing her grade six classes. “When I can, I call them everyday, and send them letters, postcards, every week. My daughter, Sammy, before I leave, she teach me a lot about the internet, so I can send her e-mails, too.”

My first morning on the job passes. During our fifteen minute break, Leobardo and Julio lie by themselves on a pile of dried branches at one end of the field, relaxing for a few brief minutes after having eaten their mid-morning snack, while the Canadian workers chat amongst themselves. Hector moves between the two groups, his little camera is out, and he snaps several photos of both groups, before Phil informs the workers that it is time to return to work.

Eventually, the morning ends, and we return to the farm’s main parking lot for our lunch hour. Most of the migrant workers, who live in bunk-houses located directly on the farm property next to this central lot, return to their houses for their lunch hour. The first-year migrants, though, since they live in a bunk-house on the other side of the fields, eat

lunch in a small room in the barn. Their bunkhouse, three kilometres away, is too far to return to for lunch.

I meet up with several of the workers from my bunkhouse, and we walk back to *la casa rojo* for lunch.

When I return to the lot after having eaten, Hector, Leobardo, and Julio are already sitting in the back of the van, waiting for Phil to return from his home. I sit near the back of the van with them, and ask them how their lunch was. Hector asks me a pointed question, in Spanish,

“Nelson, is there a lot of racism here?”

I don’t understand the context of what he is asking.

“Uh, you mean, here, on the farm, or in Canada?”

“Well, it’s because the other Canadians, they don’t really talk to us. They eat their lunch in their break-room, we eat ours in the cuttings room. Is it because they don’t like us Mexicans?”

Hector may have been expecting some sort of explanation of this situation from me, some sort of shared understanding on the inner minds of Canadians. Instead, I answer, “I’m sorry, I really don’t know.”

I want to question Hector and the others more on their thoughts on this subject that he has just brought up, but the foreman and other Canadians enter the van, and I decide to hold my questions until later.

## **A First ESL Class**

That evening, I begin preparing for the first of my English-as-a-second language (ESL) classes. Hans has given me permission to host the classes in the break-room (the same room that the Canadian workers use as their lunch-room). Befitting a farm's break-room, it is horribly filthy: mud covers the floor, thick swaths of grim coat the centre table, while dust hides the old couches lining the break-room's walls. I begin the task of sweeping away the dirt, which takes the better part of an hour.

With that task accomplished, I sit down, open up my bag, and review the short lesson plan I had set out for tonight. In line with the philosophy of the organization that has placed me on the farm, my lessons are supposed to be 'learner directed', which means that I am to ascertain from the learners themselves which methods of tutoring they desire and what they are interested in learning. I am to let them decide if they prefer having me write down conjugations on the small white-board I had brought, learn various English phrases, or practice conversation. Tonight's course is supposed to be simple enough. I plan on explaining to the learners the mission of the volunteer organisation (which is to spread English literacy to vulnerable or under-privileged populations) and additionally to begin discussing how we should go about organising the courses.

I have told nearly everyone I worked with throughout the day and had lunch with that I would begin my English tutoring class at seven o'clock, and asked my fellow co-workers to pass the word around.

By seven fifteen, the break-room-cum-classroom remains empty.

By seven thirty, I realise that, for whatever reasons, nobody is interested in having a class tonight. Just as I almost finish packing up my papers, I see Hector through the large picture window, rolling into the lot on an old bicycle.

He enters the classroom, and speaks in English, “Sorry, I am very late – I was talking to my daughter on the phone – I didn’t see the time. Did I miss the class?”.

“No, you didn’t miss anything. I don’t think there’s going to be a class tonight – nobody came!”

“Oh, I see. I see...Well, that is normal.” Hector closes the door behind him and sits on a couch directly across from me. “A lot of people, they are still working.” He holds up his left hand, his fingers spread out, and begins counting off his fingers, folding them down with the index of his right, “The guys with more years here, they do the overtime now, on the planter...”, he counts off one finger, “While Nicolas and some of the others are doing tying over on one side of the farm...”, he folds down another finger, “And Angelo, with Manual and some others, they do irrigation...”, he folds a third finger and puts his hands on his knees. “The new guys, we don’t get much overtime, but none of them wanted to come tonight. They say they feel tired. But it’s busy right now, it’s the planting, I think a lot of guys will be busy in the nights for the next couple weeks”.

“Oh, I see.” I realise why I had only seen a handful of people in the two nearby bunkhouses when I had went around to advertise tonight’s class a couple of hours ago.

“But I am here now... Maybe you can help me practice?”

“Alright, that sounds like a plan.” I feel glad to have an eager learner after my feelings of disappointment that no one was coming, while at the same time I am not sure exactly how to go about teaching someone at Hector-Alberto’s linguistic level. I open up

my backpack to pull out some papers – evaluation tests used to determine a learner’s level of proficiency in English.

“Oh, is that a computer in there?” Hector spies the laptop in my bag that I brought into the field with me. “Can I please look at it?”

I pull it out and hand it to Hector, who opens it up and turns it on.

“It’s very nice. My daughter, she tell me that she really want a laptop. It would help her in school a lot.”

We begin the English evaluation, and I have Hector-Alberto read several English paragraphs of increasing difficulty. After listening to him read the paragraphs with few errors, I ask where he has learned his English. He informs me that the state where he spent the first ten years of his childhood, Sonora, was near the United States border, and that his elementary school hired teachers from Texas for English classes, and generally had a strong emphasis on having the students learn a second language.

He mentions that although he didn’t finish high school, he has a desire to go to university. “It’s in my big plans. Maybe in 5-6 years, I go back to study computers, and programming”. Hector adds in that perhaps he would study farming and become a farming engineer in Mexico, so that he would be able to apply the things he learns in Canada.

Hector glances at my laptop again. “Do you have an, umm, do you know what a *grabador* is?”

“A burner? Yeah, I have CD burner on it.”

“Oh. Excellent. Can I ask you a favour then?”

He pulls the now-familiar grey-clothed bundle out of the pocket of his shirt,

“I have this camera, and I take a lot of pictures with it. Do you think you could...Could I put use your computer and put them on a CD, please?”

“Yes, for sure. No problems at all.”

“Oh, great. Thank you. Thank you very much!”. Hector smiles ear-to-ear.

As a side-note, I would like to make mention of Hector-Alberto’s unique style of speech. In all of our conversations of this day, Hector had used an extremely cordial and formal manner of speaking, yet the self-assured and amiable tone of his voice off-set what may otherwise be interpreted as a submissive and docile way of presenting himself. I originally thought this to be his way of speaking with new acquaintances, or perhaps a reflection of how he had learned to address people in his second language. Over the coming weeks, I was to realise otherwise, as he maintained similar styles of formalised and polite speech while addressing and speaking with everyone around him, including the other migrant workers while speaking in his mother tongue.

We make plans for me to come to his bunk-house the next evening to meet the other first-year workers and to make a CD of the pictures he had stored on his digital camera.

### **Beginning the Photo Narration Project**

The following evening, after work had finished, I make the three kilometre bike-ride over to the first-year workers’ bunk-house, known as the Stone House. Their home was not a ‘bunk-house’ per se, but rather an old farm-house the farm owner had recently purchased to house his growing number of migrant workers. I enter through the porch

into the kitchen, where Jose, Leobardo, Martin, Augusto, and Hector are finishing up their respective suppers.

I talk with the men at length, and take the opportunity to tell them why I am here, about my project, and ask where they are from in Mexico, how long they have been in Canada and where they had previously worked. Martin, upon hearing that I study anthropology, begins explaining the several different archaeological sites near his home community, including one that houses several two-meter tall statues which he felt were quite fascinating. The men are friendly with me, and patient as I verbally stumble a few times while accustoming my mind to speaking Spanish.

I recall Hector's question from yesterday, about racism on the farm. Trying to probe deeper into the topic, I bring it up again, asking Hector what he meant.

Leobardo answers for him, explaining the circumstances while looking up from his stew, "It's that there isn't any interaction between the Canadians and the Mexicans on this farm. Because we don't speak English, and they don't speak our language."

Hector and I eventually retire to the living room, where we connect his camera to my lap-top and begin to transfer pictures onto the computer's memory. Meanwhile, he brings out an envelope filled with several developed photos.

Now that there are just the two of us, Hector switches to English.

"I have these photos that I develop in town a few days ago. I will send them to my family in Mexico soon, but do you want to see them?"

I readily agree.



Showing me a photo of the snow-covered yard of a neighbour, he explains his first picture, pointing at its features. “This tree here, it is very different now. When we come here, it have no leaves, and it is covered in – how do you say *nieve*?”

“Snow.”

“Yes, in the snow... OK, when I come to Canada, I see the snow. It’s my only picture for the snow, and this is very, very tall (*motioning to the tree*). In Mexico, not very tall. In Mexico, more *chiquita*, how you say that?

“ Smaller.”

“ Yeah, smaller. But now it is very different, it have green leaves. I take pictures of this same tree while I am here, and see how it change. In another couple of months, it will be much more different than now.”

His second photo is of him, Augusto, and Leobardo sitting on the couch in their living room. Hector is in between the two, sporting a full-toothed grin, while the other two remain more aloof.

“ It’s me and...This picture is with the flash. This one, I check how to do the automatic flash and automatic click for take a picture. Leobardo, and Augusto. This is soon after we arrive in Canada. Look at my *ponza*! I am very fat in this one!”

The last photo is nearly identical in pose, but with dimmed lighting and two other men sitting in the spots of Augusto and Leobardo.

“This is me with Enrique and Mene. I forget the flash on this one.”

The pictures finish downloading onto my computer, and he offers to show me his digital photos, quickly clicking through the collection, flashing them on the screen of the laptop while giving brief descriptions of each one. In total, he has transferred over a

hundred photos onto my laptop, the totality of two months of his digital photography while in Canada. Most focus on the everyday life of the farm, quick snap-shots taken at breaks and lulls in work, of migrant workers clad in dusty blue coveralls waiting in the lot in the morning, greenhouses off in the distance, and tractors stirring up clouds of dust. Other pictures are of non-work experiences and settings, photos of the neighbourhood's bungalows which Hector calls 'typical Canadian houses', several different stands of trees taken over the course of several months showing their growth and change throughout the late winter and early spring, and scenes of men cooking within the bunk-house. In a large number of these photos, Hector has inserted himself in the scene, in what he calls an "auto-picture", by holding the camera at arms length and photographing himself.

Additionally, Hector, admitting to be an automotive admirer, has taken numerous pictures of cars and motorcycles that he had seen in parking lots in the nearby town, usually from several angles, with some shots focusing on the tailpipe of the vehicle, or the rims, or motorcycle consoles.

As Hector described his photos, I felt sentiments similar to anthropologist Barbara Wolbert, who, on using family pictures as a research tool, suggests their attractiveness as research data since they are "untainted" by the researcher. "Unlike the narratives that I had initiated, these photographs were unsolicited. I played no part in taking the pictures. This is what made them ethnographically so attractive to me" (2001: 21). In seeing these pictures, the pragmatic anthropological student side of me spoke in my sub-conscious, telling me the potential of such data for my research project. A raw and compelling window into the migrant worker experience, untainted by such things as the anthropology student's project aspirations, existing as an *a priori* to my entrance in the field.

The next day at work, I brought up the subject of using Hector's photos in my project. By this time I had formulated myself a plan of how I might incorporate his photos into my research project. Hector had already requested the use of my laptop to burn CDs of his photos over the summer; I planned to ask him if I could keep digital copies of these photos, and have him narrate recorded descriptions and explanations of the photos he took. Hector readily agreed, and informed me that he would help me in my project, but he stipulated that he wished to do the photo-narratives in English only, and that I would correct his grammatical errors during these recordings. Afterwards, he would get a copy of the interviews so that he would be able to see how his English had improved over the course of the summer. From then on, every week or so, we would meet in the break-room, and he would download his photos onto my laptop, afterwards, we would record his descriptions and the ensuing conversations which these pictures generated.

### **Patterns within Hector's Photos and Narrations**

Over the coming weeks, I began noticing certain patterns in Hector's photos and the themes he described. He would typically take about 30 photos a week, which he would upload onto my computer the Tuesday or Wednesday evening of each week. The first group of photos, about 100 in total, represented his first two months with his digital camera, which he had purchased towards the end of his second month on the farm. This first grouping of pictures were rather 'work-centric'; in this set, Hector-Alberto had mostly taken pictures which highlighted his experiences on the job: tractors, men loading trailers, auto-photos of Hector planting saplings in the dirt, and so on.

By the third week of our photo-narration project, by which time Hector had been working in Canada for nearly four months, the proportion of work-related photos dropped off drastically. I took this to suggest that the novelty of the work as part of his migrant experience was fading in relation to other facets of his life. As the spring progressed and the weather warmed, Hector had begun to leave the farm area and the bunk-house more frequently, typically utilising his one day off per week, Sunday, to travel with his friend and fellow migrant worker Mene, unfortunately one of the few friends he had on the farm. Together, the two would spend their day of rest biking around the local area, visiting the neighbouring towns and touring various road-side flea markets. Hector's pictures began to focus more on these experiences taking place during his time away from the farm, and his Sunday photos came to represent around half of the pictures he took over the summer. Meanwhile, the amount of auto-pictures of Hector stood at around a third of the total.

In his recorded narration of his pictures, Hector often brought up concepts of change, progress, and chronological transformations. Pictures were described not just by who was present or what was occurring in the frame, but what the picture represented in terms of the passage of time, both past and future. A picture of a tree was explained by how different the tree looked a month ago and how the leaves and branches will have grown a month from now, while pictures of Hector's co-workers provoked discussions about how they had physically changed in the past few weeks or months.



Hector: This picture is important because it is Arturo. Arturo don't eat very well. He lose weight very fast! Compare this picture to today, the face is very different. The eyes, is lower, his eyes, they dip. Compare this picture, is very very different. I don't know what he eat, but he lose weight very very fast.

Nelson: That's a month ago?

Hector: Yeah, a month.



Hector: This is you. You see, you change. In few weeks, you lose weight. You don't have, how do you say, *ponza*?

Nelson: Uh, belly.

Hector: You see, you don't have one. Now, you don't have one. Take this picture, compare it with another, one with the pants too, and you will see, you change. You will say, my pants have grown. When I meet you, your belt is, how do you say that, your belt is down? (*Pantomiming with his hands an exaggerated stomach hanging over his pants*)

Nelson: The belly over the belt?

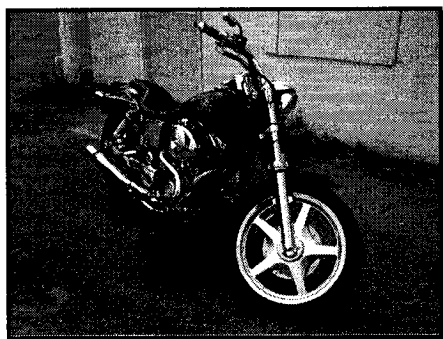
Hector: Yeah, today it is not. You lose weight, very fast!

One of the ways in which this passage of time was noted by Hector was in the fluctuating weights of those around him, and of himself as well. He himself had lost a drastic amount of weight in the first few months of the program, and had considered himself overweight prior to his time as a SAWP participant. He was quite content and proud of this bodily change, to the extent where at one point in the summer, he had me take a picture of him shirtless for him to send to his wife, proof of this new, slimmer Hector (this remained one of the few pictures in his collection which was not taken by

himself). On the other hand, other changes, such as Arturo's extreme loss of weight, were noted by Hector, and seen as unhealthy and negative.

While his photos allowed him to record the passage of time around him, he had other hobbies reflecting his interest in transition and growth; these recordings of change were equally present in other elements of Hector's life on the farm. For instance, he had taken a sapling from the farm greenhouse early in the summer, and, through a rigorous regime of root-pruning and wiring that he had learned from a book on Japanese-style arborsculpture, he had begun growing a maple bonsai tree. His agreement to embark upon this photo-narrative could equally be seen to reflect his interests in creating records of change. His involvement in the project hinged on me providing him with a copy of the recordings that we made a - record of the change and evolution of his linguistic abilities in his second language.

Perhaps the pictures to which he gave the greatest explanations were the various car photos he had taken. Although he had taken fewer of this type of photo in relation to his other pictures, he still took great lengths to explain the various modifications and customisations that the owners had made to the cars he had photographed from the various yard-sales and flea markets he visited during his day off.



Hector: This is a motorcycle. The owner he tell me he had an accident, he change the *tijaras*, *tijaras* is the scissors, what do you say this part?

Nelson: Ah, the fork.

Hector: OK, he change the fork, it different. He sell it, forty-four hundred dollars.



Hector: This is a customised Neon. In Mexico, we call it a Neon. Do you recognise the model?

Nelson: Yeah, we call it a Neon here too.

Hector: Neon? It's a ... *coche fúnebre*, how you say?

Nelson: ...A hearse.

Hector: Hearse, Horse, Hearse. It's amazing because this car use 13 inch wheels, but this one, 17 inch rims. Very big. And the tires, the tires very fat.

Admittedly, then, we had different goals for this particular project, and thus took different approaches in realising our goals. I was, of course, interested in what I could derive as viable research data from his narration, while he approached this mutual project as an opportunity to practice and improve his English with a patient listener and tutor. Therefore, it seems as though he often spent more time elaborating on the pictures which had more immediate conversation value and concrete opportunities for explanation. Listing off the parts of a customised Harley was probably more readily 'easy' for him than describing the subjective value of the photo he had taken of the sun setting in a

cloudy sky over the fields, or of the wax mannequin of a popular actor standing outside of a museum in Niagara Falls that he intended to e-mail to his daughter Samantha.

### **Static and Dynamic Memories**

What I found most curious about Hector-Alberto's photos, however, were the sheer amount of "auto-photos" Hector had taken of himself in a variety of contexts. Hector smiling while driving a tractor, shopping at the grocery store, in a greenhouse with an exaggerated look of exhaustion upon his face, or simply in the corner of the frame looking away from the camera, directing the viewer's attention to the principal scene of the photo. In any given photo session, a third to one half of the pictures Hector took would fall in the category of self-picture. During our narrative sessions, Hector rarely offered in-depth explanations of these particular photos, merely labelling them with a quick sentence "This is me", "Me again", "Another picture of me".

I had originally suspected these photos to represent a narcissistic egoism on his part, or a reflection of the fact that he often worked with co-workers with whom he shared hostilities, and didn't feel comfortable asking them to take pictures of him and for him.



*Video 54: A sweeping shot of several workers loading crates onto a trailer, followed by Hector boarding a tractor and towing the trailer away.*



A few weeks into this photo project, Hector, becoming more experimental with his camera and, with access to the memory storage capabilities of my laptop, began using the video option. The videos he began taking were short, typically ten second to one minute, silent snippets of the everyday experience of the life of a migrant worker. At work: driving in the back of the van coming home from a day of work in the fields; a break between loading crates onto a tractor's trailer. At home: the daily routine of cooking meals and getting a haircut from a fellow worker. In travel: driving down a road on his bike; a walk in the nearby shopping mall. Almost all of the 300 videos Hector made during my time on the farm follow the same formula: a sweeping shot to establish what is of interest to the viewer - his co-workers in the lunch-room, a stand of trees, a row of shops - after which he turns the camera around and films himself for a few seconds. This auto-filming feature was present in nearly all of his short videos.



*Video 127: Hector walks along a crowded pier during a Sunday trip to a nearby beach area. He remains 'unaware' that he is being watched by the camera*

In his auto-filming, Hector often established a “fourth wall” (the theatrical term for the imaginary invisible wall which separates actors from the audience) between him and the camera/viewer, frequently acting as though he is unaware of the camera’s

presence. As such, the camera unobtrusively leads him through the world in which he walks, showing him through a third-person view as he interacts in this world, as though he is unsuspecting that he is being watched. Unseen by the viewer is the fact that during this self-filming, he is awkwardly holding the digital camera himself at the end of an out-stretched arm, consciously concentrating on keeping the lens properly aimed at himself whilst walking and moving about. Hector would often break this fourth wall towards the ends of his short videos, suddenly ‘becoming aware’ of the camera’s presence and making a gesture or comical expression towards the viewer.



*Video 31: A sweeping shot of the local cemetery and nearby street running past it. Hector explained that he wanted his daughter Samantha to see how strange Canadian cemeteries are, being so close to the road where people can see the headstones all the time and where the graves can be coated in dust stirred up by passing cars. To counter the potential morbidity of the scene, Hector ends the video by filming himself making a comical expression and waving to his daughter.*

### **Keeping in Touch**

I eventually asked Hector-Alberto about his interest in photography and the reasons for his large amount of auto- pictures and video. He gave me a two-part answer. First, he was a big photography enthusiast: simply enough, he loved taking pictures. He had brought a large manual camera to Canada with him that he had often used while in

Mexico, and still enjoyed using occasionally, but it was too impractical to take with him to work and on his Sunday travels. The second part of his answer was a bit lengthier. This was his first time away from his family for such a long period of time. His wife was adjusting well, with Hector's sister-in-law helping her in taking care of the children. His youngest daughter, Cynthia, was barely three years old, and too young to realise the significance of her father's departure. But his other eleven year-old daughter, Samantha, was very attached to her father and found her father's absence particularly emotionally challenging. Hector tried to comfort her by staying in touch as best he could. During his first month on the farm, he would send letters home every week, and call home every few days. Yet, this contact only minimally comforted Samantah. One evening during Hector's second month in Canada, his daughter sounded especially downcast on the telephone, so he asked her what he could do to make her feel better. She thought for a moment, and made a simple request. Samantha said, "I would feel better if I knew what it is like for you in Canada."

Hector took his daughter's request very seriously. That Thursday, when the farm owner took him and the other migrant workers into town for their weekly shopping trip, he went to a local electronics store and bought a \$50 digital camera. The next day, he went to the local library and obtained permission to use the library's computer and internet connection. From here on, he began his own personal project: Letting his daughter know about his migrant experience in Canada, first through pictures, and then through video. On a weekly basis, he would go to the local library and send his daughter a dozen or so of the photos or several of the videos he had taken over the week via e-mail. On her side, she would regularly go to a local internet cafe to see these pictures and

video, e-mailing her father her thoughts and questions about what was happening in each display.



*Video 239: Hector shows off his new haircut while filming Alejandro, the farm's amateur barber, giving Enrique a trim.*

Seeing the guiding purpose behind the majority of Hector's photos and videos reveals that his abundance of self-photos was hardly a narcissistic move. Rather, it was his own way of creating a connection with his daughter, a link between his experiences on the farm and her life back in Mexico. As such, these digital media were not meant to show Samantha what Canada was like, what Ontario was like, or what the farm was like. Through his various methods of self-filming, in creating and breaking down a fourth wall as abstractions between himself and the viewer, Hector is trying to give the impression to his daughter Samantha that: "This is what you would see if you were here with me. This is how you would see me."

As such, these photos and videos give interesting insights not simply into Hector's experience as a migrant worker in Canada, but rather the created image of the migrant experience that he wishes to portray to his family in general and his daughter in specific.

Moreover, Hector has found his own unique way to remain a significant figure in his daughter's life despite his absence. His innovative use of technology has allowed him,

albeit on a somewhat limited level, to remain as a present and engaged father within Samantha's life. Albrow notes that "[s]ocial activities which transpire in a given locale also contribute to social worlds that may extend beyond the local level. These levels include economic linkages, such as in the case of financial remittances being sent to one's family, but also, and equally the kin-based, friendship, and special interest relationships" (1996: 156). As a labour migrant, Hector hasn't put his "former" life on hold, but, to return to Olwig and Sorensen's discussions of multi-placement, has found a way to initiate an "expansion of space" between his life in Canada and in Mexico, between himself and his daughter (2002:5). Thus, this expansion of space goes beyond capital flowing between two areas, and comes to include the ideas, experiences, emotions being shared across great distances, and of the creation of mutual memories despite these distances. As a labour migrant he hasn't left his life behind him, but has rather found a way to stretch it between two locales.

By looking at migration as transnationalisms, we are able to highlight the fact that people are simultaneously engaged in both countries of origin and destination: a back-and-forth movement of people, goods, money, and ideas over national boundaries. While this phenomenon is hardly new, new technologies such as airplanes, telephones, computers, the internet, and digital cameras, make movement and communication between these relatively large distances easier, faster, on greater scales and in differing qualities than possible as recently as fifty, twenty, even five years ago. We often consider how certain recent technological revolutions have led to an increasingly globalised world, allowing for quicker and increased movements of people, goods, and information across the globe. Such technology, as it becomes less expensive, more democratised, more

expendable, more gratuitous, is also allowing for more intimate, and emotional sharings of experiences across territory and borders.



*Video 77: The lunch-room in the barn where Hector and his first-year co-workers eat their daily lunch, followed by a shot of Hector eating his ham sandwich.*

Hector often spoke about his videos and photos in terms of the positive benefits that they brought his daughter. Although he was physically absent from her daily life, he could at least find another way to project himself, to be part of his daughter's life despite this absence. But I believe that this photo project brought Hector a number of personal emotional benefits for himself as well. Having that camera in his right breast pocket symbolised, for him, the link that he was able to maintain with Samantha, and thus served as a reminder of his reasons for having participated in this program in the first place: to provide for his family.

I began this chapter with a discussion on how migrants come to find themselves uprooted, not just physically, but cognitively. "Migration is a one-way trip. There is no 'home' to go back to" (Hall 1987: 44). I also mentioned that Hector's photo project might be seen to enforce the divide between "home" and "away" – that his project represents, in maintaining these links to his community of origin, a certain longing for the life he left

behind, a desire to return “home”. I would disagree with this interpretation, however, and see his project as rather an attempt to stretch his life and relations into the future rather than as an effort to remain entrenched in the past. As a first-time labour migrant planning on making such circular migration a fact of life over the coming years, he is finding and experimenting with ways of continuing his role as a father and of stretching his social relations within these circumstances of routine movement in the world. Rapport notes that:

For a world of travellers – labour migrants, exiles and refugees- home comes to be located in a routine set of practices, in a repetition of habitual social interactions, in styles of dress and address, in memories and myths, in stories carried around in one’s head, in the ritual of a regularly used personal name. (2002: 158)

If home is “where one best knows oneself” (Rapport and Dawson 1998: 9), then for Hector, in the process of his own personal project, home comes not to be the physical locale of his concrete apartment back home, or the wood and brick of the bunk-house, not the familiar surroundings of his home city or the increasingly-familiar surroundings of the farm and the Canadian village of Elmsdale. Rather, he finds “home” in the relationships that he had invested in and maintained, in the emotional ties that he has invested in with his family and with his daughter Samantha.

## **Chapter 6**

### **Belonging and Exclusion: Hector's and Durango's Feelings of Social (Dis)Connection on the Farm**

I suspect that the 'cultures' and 'communities' we attribute to the people amongst whom we have conducted our research are often less a matter of our own personal convictions than of conceptual convenience. (Amit and Rapport 2002: 162)

#### **Further Introducing Hector-Alberto's Nemesis**

Saturday had arrived at last. My first week of work on the farm was near completion, and I was content about how my field-work and work in the field was progressing. The burning pain in my lower back and hamstrings that had bothered me since the end of my first day of work five days ago had begun to subside– a sure sign that my body was slowly adjusting to these new physical demands. And it was the last day of the week, the day before our day off.

My own immersion into farm-life had been proceeding smoothly. The fact that I had worked here for a season in the past and already knew many of the workers had sped up this process. I had used the week to rekindle these friendships between myself and workers that had been here during my previous season in 2003, while these pre-existing relationships had encouraged those who did not know me to accept me all the quicker.

I had already located several anthropologically interesting themes to potentially explore over the course of the summer: Eulogio had been explaining to me that this was going to be his last year on the farm. He was weary of returning to Canada year after year, and planned on requesting a month-long leave of absence in September so that he



could return to his village to plant several acres of broccoli with some of his brothers which he would eventually sell – an attempt to become financially self-sufficient and no longer reliant on funds raised through Canadian migration. Meanwhile, certain workers had mentioned the divide between Canadian and Mexican workers on the farm; whether this was an element of racism or simply a result of the linguistic barrier between the two groups remained to be seen. Even the idea of how the residents of each of the three respective bunk-houses had developed their own informal division of household tasks seemed to be a potential route of inquiry. All interesting topics and all possible themes for a thesis.

Meanwhile, the mood at work during this morning had been jovial. The Canadian workers (myself excluded) had Saturdays off, only the Mexicans worked six-day weeks. On Saturdays we were typically assigned the lighter tasks: weeding the greenhouses, transferring potted trees from one poly-house to another, or some general pruning. Sunny Saturdays usually meant that Hans the farm-owner was away from the farm (Saturday was usually golf day) so the chances of the employer checking in on our work were slim. Thus, this last day of the week was a time when we would work at a slightly more relaxed, leisurely pace.

I had just finished my lunch, and was returning to the parking lot for an afternoon of work. A group of men from the Blue House were standing at the base of the driveway leading into the principal parking lot, chatting amongst themselves before the afternoon's work began. As I walk by, one of them, Nicolas, motions me over.

Nicolas has an intimidating effect on me. His mannerisms are brusque, while he is something of a bully towards the younger and less experienced workers, and often ill-

tempered. This imposing aura is reflected in his appearances. Approaching sixty, his faded blue baseball cap hides his greying hair, while a thick-silver moustache covers a weathered face from which his two, small, intense eyes emerge, partially hidden behind cheeks that have the appearance more of leather than flesh. He has had several teeth removed, with metal replacements in their stead, while his gums are lined with a lead amalgam to hold his remaining natural teeth in place. He often bares these teeth in an odd grin/smirk, causing the shiny silver to glint in the light, which creates an effect that is not altogether un-sinister. His decades of farm labour are evident in his physique. Nicolas is a large, hefty man, with a protruding, solid midsection formed from an odd combination of fat and muscle, while veins criss-cross his huge sun-darkened forearms like vines entwined around tree trunks.

I join the group. In both a friendly gesture of camaraderie and an aggressive display of dominance, Nicolas gives me a forceful open-palmed smack across the chest, while nodding in the direction of the other side of the parking lot, where Hector has just come out of the break-room and is walking towards the greenhouses.

“Be careful with him – he’s a fag.” Nicolas says in Spanish, with a serious, solemn tone.

“What do you mean?”

“He’s homosexual. He wants to give kisses to people.”

“Uhh..I don’t think so, Nicolas. He told me that he’s married, and he’s got kids.” I am unsure as to where Nicolas wants to take this discussion.

“This Alberto, he’s your good friend?” Nicolas glares me in the eye, still speaking slowly and calmly, although his lips have curled, revealing his metallic smirk.

“Well, uh... It’s only a week that I know him.”

“Because...” Nicolas punctuates his remark by making an exaggerated limp-wrist motion with his hand , “...He might be very gay. He might want to give you kisses.”

### **Introduction: We’re connected? On What Grounds?**

Nicolas didn’t really believe that Hector-Alberto was homosexual. Without embarking on a detailed exploration of the meanings of the connection between masculinity and sexuality felt by males from Nicolas’ generation within rural Mexico, or on contingent issues of homophobia, suffice to say, in this particular situation, being derogatorily identified as homosexual is less a comment on one’s sexuality than an effacing of one’s masculinity, and, hence, in this context, a denial of one’s full personhood. For an assortment of reasons, Nicolas held a grudge against Hector: he saw him as a nuisance, a threat, and an adversary, and took it upon himself to damage Hector’s image on the farm, potentially to get him fired or at least make his experience miserable enough so that he would not return.

A detached outside observer may readily place these two men in the same group: they share the same language, nationality, class background, ostensible rural background, religion, maybe, if one wished to venture into such contestable grounds, the same “culture”. One thing for sure, though, is that, despite the label they shared of “Mexican migrant worker”, and the common categories to which they both could be ascribed membership, neither Nicolas nor Hector felt that they had much in common.

The study of clearly defined groups, delineated societies, and “bounded” cultures has been the trademark of anthropology, an expertise of the discipline. Yet, the idea of “culture”, however, has become less viable in an increasingly interconnected world

(Kennedy and Roudomertof 2002), and revealed, as Amit's above quote mentions, as a heuristic tool, a "conceptual convenience", rather than "social fact". Studies of mobility and an interconnected world raise questions as to whether such a place-focused culture model was valid to begin with (Hastrup and Olwig 1997:4).

Anthropological studies have had a disposition to place those being studied into one over-arching group, content to highlight the commonalties within these factions rather than questioning the validity of such categorisation or the immense diversity occurring within these same groups. "Ethnographers overlooked the fact that it was actually their own methodological needs and strategies which generated this result, e.g. the use of the village as a manageable unit for purposes of eliciting information and for providing a convenient focal point from which to construct a picture of an entire culture." (Kennedy and Roudomertof 2002: 9). Rapport and Dawson solidify this line of thought by pointing out that the "...localising image of separate and self-sufficient worlds' which we encounter in much anthropological work was actually "never more than a useful ideology that served the interests of (some) anthropologists" (1998:4).

The concept of informants operating within one interconnected social arena, an arena open to the anthropologist, is equally contestable: "[I]n a world of infinite interconnections and overlapping contexts, the ethnographic field cannot simply exist, awaiting discovery. It has to be laboriously constructed, prised apart from all the other possibilities for contextualization to which its constituent relationships and connections could also be referred" (Amit 2000:6).

In an earlier chapter, I critique researchers of the SAWP for uncritically making use of the labels "migrant workers" or "Mexican migrants" in describing the collective

experiences of SAWP participants, and I have begun to contend that such uncritical use of labels risks presenting the individuals of this program as members of a homogenous group rather than a diverse collection of individuals. Up to this point, the reader may feel that I have used the label and category of “Mexican migrant worker” somewhat uncritically, and that I have unjustly lumped migrant workers into this one category. It may be argued that I am uncritically using the stories of Hector-Alberto and Durango to be somehow emblematic of some form of homogenous “migrant experience”.

I entered the field under the assumption that I would be looking at an interconnected group of individuals, “Mexican migrant workers”, who, for all accounts, occupy a place near the bottom of the ladder in Canadian society. As explained in an earlier chapter, they work within a program that recognises their use for their labour and little else. They live together on farms where farm owners see them for their instrumentally, as units of labour who are cheaper, more efficient, and more readily available than Canadian labour. Meanwhile, the Canadian communities they live in do little to integrate these persons socially, while linguistic barriers presents challenges to the everyday tasks of banking and shopping. With these preconceptions in mind, paired with my own irresolute Marxist leanings, a major personal research interest when beginning my fieldwork was to see how these migrant workers collectively circumvented these challenges they faced. I was interested in seeing how older, more experienced migrants would integrate newer members in teaching them the ways of the farm and community; how these new migrants would become members within this group, this category of “migrant workers”. I wanted to see how they would co-operate together to subvert the power structures in which they were entwined; how they politically saw their

place within the program and the greater global economy. However, echoing Bozzoli's astute observations in her study of women rural-urban migrants in South Africa, the men I worked and lived with "are not permanently colonised and dehumanised victims, deprived of their humanity and selves", but neither are they "the fully class-, race-, and gender-conscious subjects of the struggle for liberation that perhaps some would hope and wish them to be" (1991: 239). They should be categorised neither as oppressed nor as liberationists. They are individual actors.

During my brief time on Groesbeck Farms, I quickly realised that most of my co-workers saw little in common with each other beyond a shared common language, being from roughly the same geographical location, and sharing the comparable experiences of having lived in a rural environment in their communities of origin. Social connections were formed or denied, but I saw these as rather expressions of friendship or fellowship rather than as being based on common membership in a homogenous group or community, whether cultural or ideological.

As such, this chapter deals with issues of inclusion and exclusion on the farm, and how our two protagonists, Hector-Alberto and Durango, were able to establish (or failed to establish) a sense of belonging which went beyond group membership.

## **Durango : Finding a Sense of Belonging**

### **Episode 1: "These guys are like family"**

Durango and I shared similar morning routines, waking up around the same time and having breakfast together in the bunkhouse lunch-room. He would eat sweet pastries from his plastic tray, along with a one litre measuring cup filled to the brim with a

mixture of microwave-heated water, instant coffee, and sugar, while I ate my bowl of cereal and banana, seated across the table from him. On occasion, other bunkhouse residents would join us – Eulogio, if he woke up early enough for breakfast or a coffee (which he rarely did), or Pancho, if he slept in and missed his sunrise meal.

On this particular day, Max was sitting at the table with us, drinking his coffee while talking with Durango about some issues the first-year workers were facing. To put this present discussion in context, there had been a lot of talk in the fields over the past few days about Martin, a new worker who had also become a good friend of Durango's. Martin had been on our staking team for the past few weeks, but was more recently placed onto Richard's team. In his absence, the three residents of the first-year worker's bunkhouse, nick-named the Stone House, were complaining a great deal about certain grievances they felt towards him.

The first-year workers were still trying to put together their own system of organisation in their household, and it seemed like they still had a few affairs to work out. Several weeks prior, through Max's assistance, Augusto and Hector had installed a phone line in the house, after having used a public phone at a nearby corner store for their personal calls for the first few weeks. However, once they had received their first bill after two months of telephone use, Martin refused to pay a share of it. The others in the house assumed that it would be a co-operative venture, but Martin claimed that he never agreed to have a phone line installed, and, he had added, had never used it, and thus, he argued, he had no reason to pay for a share of it. Following this dispute, other members of the Stone House complained amongst themselves loudly in the field, always in the absence of Martin, about his frugality concerning this phone bill. They were always quick

to point out that this was a matter of principal rather than of money, since the bill was split six ways, the price per person only worked out to a couple of dollars a week.

Durango had been growing tired of hearing their complaints, and was frustrated over the fact that the first-year workers were content to talk loudly about Martin behind his back rather than approaching him and trying to solve the issue, sentiments that he shared with Max over morning coffee. The conversation quickly changes topic as the two men explain to me why their own household runs as smoothly as it does.

Durango: There's problems in that house. And you know what, it's not all Martin, those problems. It's the rest of them, too, always talking behind each other's back... You, if you have a problem with somebody, yeah, complain about it, it's OK. I'll complain about someone in the field, maybe for ten, fifteen minutes, and that's it. But those guys don't give it a rest. It's all they talk about.

Max includes me in the conversation, and explains the issue to me from his point of view. Being considerate that I am operating in my second language, he slows down his rate of speech to be sure I understand.

Max: The problem is that they are all first years, they don't have any organization yet. This house (*pointing at the floor to refer to our bunk-house*) runs well, we know how it works, with the bathrooms and the stoves and the cleaning, and we know each other's characters... It all works out well.



Durango: Um-hum...We've all been here a few years, some of us more than others. I know that guy, I know Max... and maybe he knows me a bit better. Yeah, if Max does something I don't like, well, I know his character, and I know that it's probably not a big deal. It's like, no problems, whatever.

Max: Yeah, the new house, they don't have that yet... They don't have a *system*.

Nelson: Well, the first year must be hard. Maybe the second year will be a bit better.

Max: No....No, I don't think so. It might be worse... It's a question of chemistry. If you put two people together, and they don't have chemistry, it's just not going to work.

Durango: Yeah, like last year, we had thirteen guys in this house!

Nelson: Thirteen! That's way too many!

Max: Yeah, but that's the thing...They all fit in well, they knew how things worked pretty quickly... If the chemistry is there, you can have guys together, no problem. But if it's not there, then...even with just four guys together... or six like them, the guys in the Stone House, and you're going to have problems.

Durango: ...Like me, my first year in Canada, I was with three other guys. And it just didn't work. It was real bad, we just didn't get along. Maybe now that I'm not there, it works out better, but who knows?.....

After we've concluded our conversation, it is time to go work. This day on the job, our work team is engaged in the usual routine of staking. The warm morning is passing quickly. Durango is poking twelve-inch deep holes in the ground next to each sapling with a metal T-bar, while I follow him, placing the metal rods in each of the fresh holes. Not far behind, Mene is securing each sapling to its support pole with plastic ribbon. Wanting to know more about Durango's thoughts on living here in Canada, and life in the bunkhouse, I ask him about what it has been like living on other farms as a SAWP participant.

"You know, my first year here, in Canada, it was hard work. In vegetables, not far from Leamington. You understand where that is, yeah?... We'd start at 6:30, and go to 9:00. Thirteen hours every day, seven days a week. We'd get half a day off on Friday, we'd get off at 3:00 and then go buy food." He laughs, and jabs his T-bar into the soil at the base of another sapling. "Damn, my back was sore that year! But I made a fuckin' lot of money, maybe 500 every week."

"....The next year, I went to a big farm, not too far from here. There were lots of Mexicans there, maybe 150, and 100 Canadians. But I didn't like it there very much. There was a guy who was working there for a while, a Mexican, and he thought that he was the boss of everyone....That guy was a bit of an asshole, a bit of an asshole, he was...

A bit like *Cocolisso* here (“*Baldly*”, *Durango’s* *nick-name* for *Eulogio*). He thought he could tell everyone what to do, and one day, I had enough....”

Durango stabs his T-bar into the ground; he turns around to me with a grin on his face, letting me know that he relishes telling this part of his story.

“So, I tell him, OK then, let’s deal with this like men”, he puts his fists up and assumes a boxing stance, “But the thing was, I was twenty-nine, he was maybe forty, so after three hits, he was like ‘OK, OK, enough, enough’ and he stopped the fight... Then, this guy goes and tells the boss... The boss comes up to me later, and asks me what the problem was.... This guy, the boss, he spoke Spanish, and a lot better than you, too. So I tell him the guy was an asshole, that’s why... Three days later, both me and that other guy are on planes back home. Ha! Asshole!”

Durango turns around and places his hands on the T-bar, and begins poking holes anew.

“Here, the guys are OK, they’re like *my family*. There, none of those guys were my friends. They’re working not too far from here, those guys. I’m never going to see them. Screw them!”

### **Episode 2: The Belly Band**

Evenings were usually spent in the bunkhouse living room, watching Mexican television via a satellite dish that the members of the house had collectively paid for. On this evening, though, a fierce rain storm is interrupting the signal, so that the television is only broadcasting static. Max switches the T.V. off, and Eulogio announces he’s going outside for a cigarette, rain be damned.

The rest of us, six in total, sit on the faded couches for a moment. Zeferino interrupts the momentary silence with a random comment to the group, “You know...I remember a few years ago, around this time... I was working in Leamington, and they had some kind of fiesta behind the church, all the guys working there. They even got some *mariachis* (a type of Mexican folk musician) there.”

Arturo leans over, asking with a vague interest, “Oh yeah, how many?”

“Oh... only three or four.”

“Ah, it wasn’t a real *mariachi* band then.” Arturo turns to me to explain, “You need at least, maybe, twenty guys for a real *mariachi* band.”

Max, an avid musician and guitar player, sits with his back leaned up against an arm of the couch, and his legs spread out where Eulogio had been sitting, energetically adds in “Yeah, you need the lead guitar man...,” he strums an invisible guitar with his fingers.

“That’s right. And the *tamboras* (a large style of drum).” Zeferino says, “But it looks like some already have their *tamboras* built-in!” He chortles while pointing a finger at Max’s bulky midsection.

Everyone in the room laughs heartily at Zeferino’s off-hand comment. Durango, who had been fetching himself a beer from the fridge in the next room, comes back into the living room with a bottle in one hand and his T-shirt in the other.

Max, barely containing his laughter, roars, “And here comes another one now!”, pointing at Durango’s own exposed abdominal girth. “....And we’ve got Arturo here... He can be our clarinet!”

Everyone roars with laughter, while the skinny Arturo cackles at the joke made at his expense.

Durango, sitting down next to the equally thin Horacho, joins in on the running gag. “ Yeah, and this guy here...”, as he gives the man next to him a friendly tap on the shoulder, “Horacho can be the fuckin’...what’s it called?... the fuckin’ violin!”

The crowd cracks up again, with Durango’s bellowing laughter the loudest. Zeferino, settling down momentarily and catching his breath, diverts from the idea of forming a *mariachi* band. “Yeah, when you see Max on the tractor, all you see is...” He grabs his own plentiful midsection, and shakes it up and down, while mimicking the bouncing motion of the tractor, “ Pa-chung! Pa-chung! Pa-chung!”

Max, showing that he’ll condone this innocent heckling, follows up with his own round of jest. Jumping off the couch onto his feet, he grabs his fleshy stomach in his two hands, and spiritedly flops it up and down. “You mean like this?” His antics raise another chorus of laughter. Max, still chuckling, wipes a tear from his eye, and then, forcing a serious expression on his face, clarifies the situation. “Yeah, but I’m not as bad as Alejandro. Me, it’s only in the front. Him, it’s on the sides too!” This time, Max extends his arms to his sides and front, pantomiming an enormous belly, and bounces up and down as though he’s riding a tractor once more, while his arms mimic an undulating belly “Pwish! Pwish! Pwish!

Meanwhile, Durango is speechless, laughing too hard to make an attempt at words. He takes a breath and steadies himself, “Yeah, that guy!... I’m surprised that he doesn’t hurt himself, with all that flab hitting him all the time!.... One of these days,... his gut’s going to smack him in the face!!!”

The rest let out another roar of laughter as Durango mimics a gigantic belly slapping him across the face.

### **Discussion: Durango and ‘Fitting In’**

As a SAWP participant, Durango was in a position where he worked and lived in close quarters with the same limited section of people over a long duration of time. He had come to place special value on developing positive group dynamics and fellowships with the majority of people which he lived and worked with, and felt that the bonds he managed to establish between himself and the other migrant workers on Groesbeck Farms were particularly worthwhile. He defines the necessary criteria that residents of the same bunkhouse must possess in order to co-exist in a favourable manner: they must possess certain ‘chemistry’, be tolerant, accepting, and willing to overlook problems, and be able to find ways to co-operate together. Durango may not have developed enduring friendships with everyone with whom he lived in the bunkhouse, but had come to a point where he could co-exist positively with them. Having worked at two other farms where he never felt he really ‘fit in’, he realised that at Groesbecks’, he had found a group of men with whom he could share a generalised sense of belonging, a place where he was willing to spend an evening laughing about co-workers’ (and his own) flabby mid-sections, where he was willing to attest that these co-workers and room-mates were “like family”.

Durango’s experiences of establishing a sense of belonging contrasts with Hector-Alberto’s experiences of being generally excluded from the fabric of farm life and

the relative difficulty he felt in setting up persistent social bonds while employed at Groesbeck Farms.

### **Hector-Alberto: Circumventing Social Exclusion?**

#### **Episode 1: Hector and the Sunday Service Group**

Hector-Alberto had difficulty ‘fitting in’ on the farm. Unlike Durango, he had difficulties integrating with the other Mexican migrants on the farm, and had yet to find a feeling of belonging with his fellow migrant co-workers. Meanwhile, several other workers, especially Nicolas and Alejandro, had been spreading various rumours about him among the other workers on the farm, leading to his general ostracization among the Mexican contingent at Groesbecks’. To add to the slander, while he preferred his first name, Hector, as his common title, the other workers, at Nicolas’ insistence, had taken to calling him Alberto, linking him to a popular Mexican folk singer of the same name who had recently declared his homosexuality.

In mid-July, Hans hired another Canadian worker, named Jeremy. While I was on Nicolas’ staking team, Hector and Jeremy joined together on another work crew, and the two often worked side-by-side in the fields. Hector actively pursued a friendship with Jeremy, partly out of a desire to practice his English with a native speaker, and, by this point having been ostracised among the majority of other workers, for some human contact. The two soon found that they both held common values in Christianity: while Hector-Alberto was a devout Catholic, Jeremy was a practising Baptist.

While working together one day, Hector explained to Jeremy how, in Mexico, he would usually go to Mass almost every Sunday, and how it was a piece of his life that he

greatly missed. He also explained how he had considered going to a service at the nearby United church, but felt awkward going without knowing anyone there or without having been invited by a member of the congregation.

Jeremy then disclosed his membership in a Sunday service group to Hector. Despite feeling a strong connection to his religious beliefs, Jeremy had, a few years ago, began feeling frustrated with the old-fashioned ways of his church, the solemn tone of the minister's sermons, and the uninspired singing of an ageing choir. This led him to join, along with his wife and two young children, a local "alternative" Sunday service group that had formed in his town. This group had come together several years prior, established by a young minister who had felt similar frustrations. As Jeremy explained to Hector, this minister saw that the local Baptist churches were too traditional and formal, and didn't provide a space appealing to the younger members. So, this minister decided to take the "church" out of church, and began holding outdoor Sunday service in a neighbour's backyard. The sermons were intended to be more dynamic and relevant than that of the traditional Church, and the minister encouraged the congregation's active participation in the sermons by inviting members to either occasionally put together their own presentations or by playing music. Christian folk music on more contemporary instruments such as guitars was preferred to the more traditional hymns. Jeremy explained that this outdoor Sunday sermon group was becoming quite popular in his town, especially among the 25-40 age set.

After a couple of weeks working together, Jeremy invited Hector to one of these services. Following his attendance, Hector explained his experience during our weekly



photo-narrative session, while showing me some of the pictures he had taken during the service.

Hector explained how the minister had spoken for a bit, and then a woman had told a short inspirational story, after which Jeremy had taken out his guitar and sang a few songs in front of the congregation. Hector expressed his content at having had the opportunity to attend such a service, after having not been to church in several months.

“I feel more pure now, I feel better, now that I go to the Mass.”

Hector showed me a picture of the congregation of about twenty people, seated on plastic folding chairs on the grass, and continued his recounting. “Then, at the end, they ask me to stand up and say who I am. I say ‘My name is Hector-Alberto, I am from Toluca, I am very happy to be here.’”

Hector continued to explain that following the service was a potluck lunch, where everyone socialised and chatted together. Apparently, a large number of people had been interested in talking to him, their foreign visitor. Hector admitted that he was at first somewhat apprehensive about coming to the service, as a Catholic coming to a Baptist service, and he expressed his anxieties to the group around him. “But they say there are no problems. The *padre*, the minister, he say ‘No, no, you are our Christian brother! Our Mexican Christian brother!’”

Hector continued to join Jeremy over the next few Sundays to attend the service. After Jeremy quit his job at Groesbeck Farms, in the middle of August, though, Hector’s attendance soon ended. For a couple of weeks following his resignation, Jeremy continued making the long drive to the bunkhouse to pick Hector up on the Sunday morning. Then, one Saturday evening, Jeremy called Hector to tell him he wasn’t going

to that Sunday's service, but he would call him and make plans for the following Sunday. He never did, and Hector stopped attending the Sunday service.

## **Episode 2: Hector, Agosto, and the Exclusive Barbecue**

The mid-summer barbecue had become a tradition among the migrant workers on the farm. Every season over the past several years, in mid-July, the Mexicans would all pool together their money to buy a large quantity of food and beer, and then hold a small party for themselves on a Sunday. The centre of this party was the barbecue, typically a large cut of beef or a sheep buried in a pit with hot coals, roasted to perfection.

This year, Nicolas and Alejandro, residents of the Blue House, had taken it upon themselves to organise the buying of the supplies, and began discussing their plans while in the field in the week leading up to the barbecue. Once, Alejandro questioned Durango as to how much beer they should purchase and Hector-Alberto, working in a row nearby and overhearing the conversation, inquired, "There's going to be a barbecue?"

Alejandro brushed off Hector's question brusquely. "Yeah, but you're not invited, Alberto", and continued working.

Later on in the morning, Agosto, also a first-year worker, overheard Alejandro and Nicolas further discussing their plans, and questioned as well when the party would be. Alejandro answered similarly as before, "Well, it's only for the experienced...Those who have more than a year at the farm".

That weekend, the Blue House held the annual barbecue, but with some substantial changes to the tradition. Instead of having it outside on a Sunday afternoon, it was held inside on a Saturday evening, with the meat being roasted in the oven rather

than in a home-made outdoor fire-pit, perhaps changes made in case members of the Stone House had any plans to serendipitously drop in during the Sunday afternoon.

This party, which had began a number of years before as a celebration of everyone having reached the four-month mark in their contracts, was usually a practice in fellowship and affinity. It arguably served as a time to remember that they, the migrant workers, were in similar situations, away from their friends and families in a foreign land, while being primarily a joyful recognition of the fact that they were all halfway through their time in Canada. But through the selective manner in which attendees were invited, this particular year, it became as much an exercise in exclusion as inclusion.

The morning following the party, I went to pay a visit to the first year workers' house. As I steered my bike into the driveway, I saw that Hector-Alberto and Augusto were seated on the front lawn, with their backs to the wall of the house, each drinking a can of Coca-Cola. I approached them, and Augusto asked me if I had been at the party the night before. Obviously perturbed by the situation, he said that they had found out about the party in a rather unfavourable way. While the rest of the first-years had been keep in the dark about the party's existence, Martin had gone. Although Martin was a first-year worker himself, he had become good friends with Durango, Nicolas, and several other residents of the other bunkhouses, and went to great lengths to dissociate himself from the residents of his own bunkhouse. As such, Nicolas had secretly invited him to this get-together, while instructing him not to let his roommates know about the event. Augusto, Hector, and the other residents of the Stone House found out nonetheless after the fact, when Martin stumbled into the bunkhouse at four in the morning, rather inebriated and opinionated about the other first-year workers' various personality faults.

Agusto and Hector were angry, not so much at Martin's drunken nocturnal tirade, but rather what this lack of invitation meant in terms of their larger sense of connection within the farm's social web, and the curious informal hierarchy of dominance and popularity that had emerged among the migrant workers.<sup>1</sup>

Agusto: Those guys, they want to play these fuckin' games, and we're not going to play their games with them. They want to act like children, but we're not playing those games. They got no reason. They got no reason to pull us into their games.

Hector: Yeah...We come here, we work together, we live the same stuff.... And what are we trying to do? Fuck each other over!

Agusto: Uh-huh! These guys can be childish sometimes. I mean, if you don't like someone, fine! Just don't talk to that person, you don't have to go out of your way to screw them over. I mean, there's people that I don't like here, but I work with them, I find ways to put up with them.

Hector and I nod in agreement.

Agusto: Yeah! Like Eulogio. Eulogio annoys me! He annoys me so much! You know, he's always telling me what to do on the field, fuckin' pushing me around, telling me to do things this way, do it that way... I tell him, *look*, this is my first year, and I need to learn, and you gotta show me how, but he's such an asshole about it. I tell you, I'm

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<sup>1</sup> The following conversation takes place in Spanish

putting up with him for now... (*Agusto begins speaking quicker, his composure is melting into anger*) ...but in my last month, the last week, I'm going to pound him!

Hector: Ah, c'mon, Agusto, no...

Agusto: And Martin knows this, and he hangs out with them a lot, so they probably know too. But I don't care. I'll work with him, but that's it.

Hector: And me, I know that a lot of people, especially Nicolas, don't like me. (*Hector remains calmer than Agusto, and his following words are spoken slowly and honestly, without conceit*). Because they're scared of me, and they're jealous. (*He begins to list things off on his fingers*). They know I speak English better than them, even though it's my first year here, and they've been here for eleven. They know that I get along well with the Canadians... That I'll go up to them, look them in the eye, and introduce myself. They're more timid, they won't start a conversation... And they know I'm smarter than them. In 4 months I've been here now, and I know how to identify and name 8 types of plants here... Richard, he told me that it took Nicolas almost 2 years to do the same, to learn the same things. And Alejandro is trying his hardest to keep me away from tractors... Because I know how to drive them, and I can drive them in reverse, and if people know that, it will be one more tractor driver to deal with.

Agusto has regained his composure, and takes a sip of his Coke before speaking anew.

Agusto: The thing is, we're new workers. Those guys have been here for a while, eight or twelve years. We're younger, we like the work... The second month, Eulogio asked me if I liked the work. When I said yes, he wasn't happy. They don't want change, they're afraid of change. They're afraid they won't be the best here anymore.

I sympathise with Agusto and Hector, and I show it by sharing a fact from my past experiences working on the farm.

Nelson: You know, I was here for Enrique's first year. He wasn't anything special then. He had a lot of trouble with the work, he even almost got sent home half-way through. And now it's what, his forth year? He's forgotten what it's like to be a first-year.

Hector: He wants to be a little boss himself. But he just wants to *tell* people what they're doing wrong, not *show* them *how* to do it.

Agusto: That's the thing. We're in the same position that they were a few years ago. And are they trying to help us? No, they are trying to fuck us over! They won't teach us anything, they don't show us how things work in Simcoe (*the nearby town where the workers do their shopping and banking*). We're on our own here.

Nelson: Yeah, but remember, they're not all bad.

Agusto: No, no, no, no. There's good people there too, I know. Like Angelo. And Max.

Hector: Yeah, Max. But he's a special case.

Agusto: Yeah, he's special. There's more assholes than good people.

### **Discussion: Hector-Alberto and Tensions between the New and Old**

This year on the farm represented a unique year, one of change. The farm-owner having recently bought 200 additional acres of farm-land, bringing his amount of land from 400 to 600 acres, had built new green-houses, as well as purchasing a new house, the Stone House, for the five new workers brought to the farm this year. The farm was diversifying its products, bringing in new species of trees and beginning the growing of potted trees.

Following from this, among the migrant workers, there was an assortment of changes in how things previously were. In years past, the farm only employed sixteen to eighteen workers. There had been typically ten workers of the "old guard", that is the veteran workers who had at least five years of experience at Groesbeck, along with mixture of newer workers with two or a maximum of three years of experience, combined with not more than two or three first-year workers.

Very few of these new and first-years would become veterans. Either, following a year or two at Groesbecks', they would find the 8-month contract too long to tolerate, and attempt to secure shorter four-to-five month contracts on other farms. Or, often enough,

the farm owner would not 'name' these new workers, choosing not to rehire them in the subsequent season. In any case, in previous years, new workers and old would be mixed together within the two original bunk-houses, the Blue House and the Red House.

During the year in which my fieldwork took place, things changed. The new workers were separated, not just by being in a different bunkhouse, but in a bunkhouse that was also separated by a distance from the other two. The Stone House was three kilometres away, while the Red and Blue Houses were located in close proximity to each other, near the farm's main lot. As such, the new workers were harder to assimilate into the fabric of farm-life and into the informal hierarchies that existed beforehand among the migrant workers.

For instance, Eulogio had carved out his own particular niche on the farm, a result of his long years on the farm and his own aggressive temperament. He had been able to exert a degree of dominance over his house-hold in the bunk-house: he had his own particular place on the brown couch in the living room, and his spot at the lunch table, and was the only worker to have his own private bedroom. Since Eulogio was commonly a foreman in the workplace, the bunkhouse residents had learned that their lives would be much easier at work and at home if they allowed him these certain advantages. His dominance at home reinforced his dominance in the work-place and vice-versa.

Meanwhile, he and others with similar seniority would be able to take advantage of off-work hours to mentor new workers on how things were to be on the farm, and put certain people 'in their place'. This could take the form of a small evening chat in the bunkhouse hallway, instructing a particular worker that he was not working hard enough, and that the rest of his crew had to pick up his slack, or that perhaps he was working too



hard, and making everyone else look bad. The bunkhouse had become a place to pass on these informal rules.

But the new bunkhouse operated outside of this system, and the heads of the older bunkhouses did not seem to have the inclination or perhaps the ability to stretch their authority to this distance homestead.

The residents of the Stone House, then, represented a certain threat. The veterans, with their many years on the farm, held a certain status among the other migrant workers, and, due to their experience and knowledge of how the farm worked, felt a certain level of job security. However, their many years of experience on the farm were becoming a hindrance as well as an asset. The veterans had anywhere from eight to eighteen years of work experience at Groesbeck Farms, while many of them had been manually labouring on Canadian farms for over twenty years. As they were nearly all in their fifties, the physical demand of farm work was beginning to take its toll on their bodies.

Eulogio, a proud hole-maker himself, often bragged of how big his shoulders had become due to thrusting the spike into the dirt, but also would occasionally complain about how his legs ached in the mornings, and had the belief that the pesticides and chemicals he had inhaled over the past decade and a half may have negatively impacted his health. He would often express how, during his four month break back home in between contracts, he would spend the majority of this time sleeping, “getting back his energy”.

The occupants of the new bunk-house, however, were young. With the exception of the slightly older Martin, they were mostly in their thirties, and none of them had made more than three trips to Canada already.

There had been tensions, often unspoken, between these new workers and the established workers on Groesbeck Farms. New workers had to prove themselves during their first few months on the farm: this meant showing that they knew how to work hard enough without working too hard, and that they respected the informal hierarchy existing among the migrant workers.

Hector-Alberto represented the prime example of a “dangerous” worker in his potential ability to upset the informal hierarchies that existed on the farm: His English abilities and the social skills to maximise this linguistic ability gave him an edge over the more established workers, as an ability to communicate directly with the employer was something that most of the workers did not possess. He was young and healthy, and showed a genuine interest in his work and in the business of the farm, and was committed to showing that he was a quick learner. Additionally, he remained relatively unaffected by the attempts at insult and ostracism levelled upon him by other individuals on the farm, showing that these methods of social control did not impinge on him greatly. This gave other individuals on the farm ever more reason to exclude him and prevent him from feeling as a member in any collectivities formed among the other Mexican migrant workers at Groesbeck Farms.

### **The Accepted and the Exiled: Comparing the Experiences of Durango and Hector**

Durango and Hector-Alberto both lived unique experiences in finding acceptance and feelings of belonging on the farm.

Durango, for his part, had invested a great deal of importance in developing and maintaining friendships with his co-workers and fellow migrants – he had past experiences on other farms to let him know that developing affinities with those with

whom he lived and worked in such close contact was of high concern. He therefore made sure that the feelings of fellowship he developed here were of a special quality. While his relationships on other farms had never contained the necessary “chemistry” to emerge into friendship and mutual affinity, at Groesbeck Farms he had found an affinity with his co-workers, to the point that he, along with a group of men ranging from the ages of thirty-one to sixty, felt comfortable enough in each others company to jokingly rib each other about their respective corpulence and jest about with their mid-sections during an evening in the bunkhouse.

Meanwhile, Hector-Alberto did not achieve a continual sense of belonging within the social networks on the farm. Failing to realise more than superficial relations with his migrant co-workers, and suffering from a fair degree of ostracism within the workplace, Hector looked away from his bunkhouse and life on the farm for meaningful relations, and these relations were of a more contingent basis. He found temporary friendships via shared religious beliefs with Jeremy, and went on to foster friendships with several other Canadian workers (myself included). However, he was unable to, denied the opportunity to, and eventually became indifferent in regards to developing the same degree of camaraderie as Durango had with his co-workers.

Amit notes that in studies of transnationalism, there has been much anthropological optimism in the abilities of migrants’ and other transnationals to form communities with relative ease wherever they travel in the world, and to thus minimise the challenges of forging social connections. “The result can be not only a distortion of how people actually experience and engage with mobility and social fragmentation; in treating the construction of transnational communities as an inevitable element of

contemporary forms of movement, we can also end up inadvertently supporting a neoliberal tendency to treat human beings as if they can and should be infinitely portable, unencumbered economic agents” (Amit and Rapport 2002: 25).

In comparing and contrasting the experiences of these two men, we see that they both had their own diverse and unique set of experiences in becoming accepted and in fostering feelings of belonging. While Durango, despite having negative feelings in the past (which ended in a violent encounter and a temporary expulsion from the SAWP program), was able to develop these possible sentiments, Hector-Alberto, due to his own individual idiosyncrasies and as well due to mitigating circumstances on the farm, was unable to form such bonds. Being part of the same nationality, speaking the same language, and being in similar economic circumstances were not enough to form the bonds needed for feelings of community and affinity to occur. “The construction of communities should never be treated as simply probable” (Ibid: 25)

Interestingly, though, although Durango had positive social experiences on the farm, these affinities were not enough to make the experience of migration attractive to him, and he frequently expressed his deep desires to return to his wife and children, and often reiterated that after one more year, he would not return to Canada:

Before I came here, I didn't have nothing. Nothing! Only my wife, that's it. Now, I got my own house, and seventeen animals...There's no way that would be possible if I stayed in Mexico. You can get a job, and get enough to get by week by week, but you can't get enough to buy the things you need. Now, this year, I'm going to sell some of my calves, and maybe buy some more...And one more year in Canada, and that's it...The thing is, I don't like it here. I got a young wife, and I'm young too. And I want to enjoy life with her. She doesn't like it that I'm here, not at all. And I don't either. That's why, when I go back, I have my own business, and I can sell enough to take care of my family (*translated from Spanish*).

Meanwhile, Hector, despite his relatively negative social experiences with his migrant co-workers, saw his experiences of migration more positively, and hoped, as mentioned in the prologue, to be able to return to Groesbeck Farms for a number of years. The relative benefits of the work and the interest he held in his off-farm experiences outweighed the rejection he experienced from the other migrants.

To the extent that anthropologists have recently relied on imagined, oppositional categories of community to locate mobile subjects, they may well be glossing over forms of movement framed in different paradigms of identity as well as forms of social engagement that provide fellowship without necessarily giving rise to highly charged collective categories. (Amit and Rapport 2002: 5)

There is thus more to a migrant's experience than the groups or bonds s/he forms (or doesn't form), and this migrant experience cannot be homogenised, regardless of what common characteristics individuals pursuing similar mobile livelihoods may ostensible share. Significant points to consider in an increasingly politically, economically, culturally, technologically connected world of movement.

## **Chapter 8**

### **Some Final Considerations**

To briefly provide an overview of the present work so far: I began this thesis with a quotation from Eric Wolf, making use of his humanistic voice to open onto my own project's look at two individuals and their lived experiences as migrant workers and participants in Canada's Seasonal Agricultural Workers' Program.

I have included a critique of the theories used to examine the experiences of migration. Through explaining my disagreements with both the abstract and simplifying terminology of the neo-classical approaches, along with my complaints against the victimisation tendencies of studies focusing on the SAWP program, I have attempted to make a case against the abstraction and simplification of human life which strip people of their individuality, of their humanity, while mentioning that the popular neo-classical approaches essentially lack much explanatory power.

This thesis has also been something of an experiment. I have attempted to place the ethnographic experience at the forefront, and to have my ethnographic material inform this work's theoretical backings rather than the other way around. In place of attempting to make a succinct, straight-forward theoretical argument explaining the circumstances of Mexican migrant workers, I have instead opted to attempt a description of the complexity of their lives and experiences in Canada.

The reader will have also noticed by now that I have chosen not to present my ethnography chronologically, but rather presented themes in the order which I felt best

represented the levels of meaning each of my informants accorded each theme. Durango gave more importance to his identity as a hole-maker than to cultivating a sense of belonging among his co-workers, while Hector's relationship with his daughter and his photographic project took precedence in his life over his feelings of social exclusion, considerations which I have related in the ordering of the chapters. As well, layering the chronology of the ethnography has allowed me to show the multiple events taking place concurrently, and the various individual stories being written in the same span of time. Admittedly, there are rhetorical considerations in the chapter orderings and use of chronology as well. For instance, I imagine the reader to be more willing to sympathise with Hector's social exclusion once the reader has come to know him through the telling of his photo project.

Moreover, in line with this work's opening quote, this work has been about considering the human in the study of migration, and I have attempted to do so by presenting the two main informants, Hector-Alberto and Durango, as the purposeful, vivid, and resourceful individuals that I have come to know, rather than as abstract elements of what Massey *et al* refer to as transnational non-metropolitan migrant circuits (1994).

### **Possible Limitations of the Present Thesis**

It is doubtless that a flawless piece of work exists, and this present thesis does not give evidence to the contrary. However, there may be certain limitations in my work that ought not to be overlooked.

Perhaps I have been overly critical in my review on the academic literature pertaining to the Seasonal Agricultural Worker's Program. I have argued that Basok in

particular and Preibisch, Bauder, and Binford in general have framed the archetypal migrant worker as a victim of economic and structural circumstances, and have emphasised this one view of migrant workers, creating a one-dimensional characterisation of the victimised migrant rather than exploring him/her in his/her complexity. Yet, although I criticize them for their limited representations of migrant labourers, I have ostensibly shown no qualms in explaining their works in a similarly one-dimensional manner.

Although the above authors do not directly address the lived experiences of migrant workers or the concept of agency, it is hardly realistic of me to purport that they consider migrant workers to be agency-less or to believe that these writers wholeheartedly believe that SAWP participants have internalised their apparent conditions of unfreedom to the point where they are unthinking automations.

It is important to point out that the above authors, in their work, while they are generally critical of the structure of the Seasonal Agricultural Workers' Program, are not critical of the concept of a Canadian/Mexican guest-worker program as such, but rather of the policies of the SAWP which allow for exploitative conditions to occur. They desire these structures to be amended so that it is easier for SAWP migrant workers to realise their life-projects while working within these structures. These academics, then, rather than taking part in the dehumanisation of these workers, are themselves fighting against their dehumanisation, critiquing the bureaucratic structures which do not recognise their full humanity.

In many ways the arguments of these academics and my own are parallel rather than divergent; it is only that our foci of study are different.



While the above authors concentrate on the structural aspects of the SAWP, I have instead highlighted the individual operating within these structures by exploring the lived experiences of those in the SAWP program. It may be said, and this may be considered a second limitation to my own thesis, that by concentrating on the lived experiences of those in the SAWP program, I have ignored the structural conditions and constraints in which these individuals operate. Rather than providing a fuller, more complete picture of the migrant experience than Basok, Preibisch, Bauder, or Binford, I have merely allowed the pendulum to swing to the other side, and have only given an equally incomplete portrayal of the migrant experience, albeit from the opposite end of the spectrum. One might argue that I have apparently neglected to analyse the economic, political, bureaucratic, and other structures in which these individuals operate; structures which surely have an impact on their experiences in Canada, in Mexico, and on the global scene.

If I can take a moment to interject on my behalf, then, I must point out that in my earlier critiques of Basok, Preibisch, Binford, Bauder, and others, I did not completely disagree with their hypothesis, and I agree with them that the SAWP program is formed in such a way that it benefits certain individuals to a greater extent than others. I have not claimed that their findings were incorrect; merely incomplete (I am unsure if any piece of work in the social sciences could be correctly labelled as a “complete” description). With that being said, though, I could further defend against my neglect of the structural aspects involved in the migrant experience by reminding the reader that investigations into the political, economic, bureaucratic, and general structural aspects of the SAWP program

have already been examined by the previously mentioned authors in a far more eloquent and sophisticated manner than I myself could accomplish.

But, the main reason that I chose to forego an analysis of how structural components impact the lives of Hector-Alberto and Durango is because these structures, although operating implicitly in the background of their lives, did not seem to play an explicit role of interest in their day-to-day lived experiences. It was rather their own daily manifestations of creativity, sense-making, and individuality that operated in the foreground, regardless of what processes taking place in the background. As individuals who have taken on the role of migrant worker, Hector-Alberto and Durango were more than what the economy or what their employer wanted them to be. I believe this to be a testament to the argument that we live our lives beyond the structures of economy, bureaucracy, politics, and other elements which have a role to play in our lived realities.

In choosing a focal point for this thesis, I find it more interesting, compelling, and fruitful to bring forth the individual and what he or she deems important rather than presenting a limited portrait of the archetypal “exploited worker”. A focus on the individual and, in the words of Jackson, a “...detailed description of lived reality are seen as ways of resisting the estranging effects of conceptual models and systematic explanation which, when pushed too far, disqualify and efface the very life one wants to understand, and isolate us from the very life we have to live” (1996:2).

Rather than apersonal, distant theoretical explanations for migration, I have instead attempted to present the reader with individuals who respond to and create the experiences they encounter, along with their assorted individual stories, motivations, personalities, and objectives. As such, I have aimed to show migration not as a process-

in-and-of itself, but rather an umbrella term for complex myriad of interacting processes.

An individual-based approach as used in this present work shows the elements in a migrant's life – family, work, social relations, pride, longing, and belonging- which would not be visible if we are to see transnational labour migration as a simple crossing of international boundaries in search of employment.

And in closing this thesis, I ask the question that if we were to further inject a degree of humanism into the study of transnational migration, where it might continue to take us? If we are to see people as more than simplified economic entities, will it shed light on the global processes in which they are a part? The global processes in which they play a role in creating? The conversation continues....

[T]o look for commensuration rather than simply continued conversation...is to attempt escape from humanity (Rorty 1979:376)

## **Epilogue: A Returning**

### **Part 1: Hector's Return**

I left Groesbeck Farms in August 2006. I stayed in contact with my co-workers over the fall, especially with Hector-Alberto, who regularly e-mailed me with updates about farm life, along with the occasional set of photos or videos attached. In late October, I visited the farm for an evening, and made plans to visit four of my co-workers - Hector-Alberto, Durango, Eulogio, and Max - at their homes in Mexico, and to stay with each man and his family for about a week. Hector was kind enough to permit me to stay at his place on two occasions, for several days both at the beginning and end of my month in Mexico.

The contracts of the migrant employees of Groesbeck Farms were set to end November 29<sup>th</sup> 2006, and this was subsequently the day they would return home. I arrived in the Mexico City the day before, and, having been given their flight details by Hector several days earlier, I went to the airport to meet up with the recently arrived men on the date of their arrival.

Finding the appropriate gate, I join the large crowd of people already assembled, also waiting for the occupants of Flight AC167 to walk through the gates. I realise that I will have a difficult time locating Hector in this dense crowd of people, so I move upstairs, where the ledge of the food-court overlooks a section of the airport's first floor, including Gate B and the throng of people gathered around it. From this higher vantage

point, I can see that many of the waiting persons are women, with toddlers sitting on the floor at their feet, or infants held tight to their bodies.

At long last, arriving an hour late, the occupants of Flight AC167 began filing through Gate B. I recognise Guadalupe, sharing an embrace with what must be his wife, then picking up a toddler in a big hug, and carrying off his child in one arm while holding a large piece of luggage in the other. I see Pancho rejoining his own daughter, in her early twenties, and sharing a kiss with his wife. Manual exits the gate, smiling as he sees a familiar face in the crowd, moves beyond my field of vision. Finally, I spy Hector coming through the gates. He looks up and spots me, and I motion that I am coming down to meet him.

By the time I manage to relocate the escalators connecting to the lower level and make my way through the crowded hall, Hector had been joined by his fellow first-year co-workers Augusto, Julio, Jose, along with Max. We exchange pleasantries, while Max asks when I am coming to visit him. Eventually Max leaves us in order to go to the bus station to get a ride to his village.

I ask Hector if we should go with Max, and buy our bus tickets for Toluca at the same time. Hector informs me, “No, not yet. In a little bit.”

Agusto, Julio, and Jose all live some distance away from Mexico City, and have connecting flights. They ask Hector-Alberto, who apparently knows his way around the airport better than the others, where the check-in counter for their flights is. As a group, we walk to the other side of the airport, while Agusto humorously tells me the story about why the plane was late – apparently the designated pilot never showed up, and they had to wait an hour on the runway until a replacement was located. The three find their proper

check-in desk. While they are busily talking to the clerk and finalising their arrangements, Hector and I speak together about his last few days of work at Groesbeck Farms. In the back of my mind, I think about how Toluca is only a little more than an hour out of Mexico City – while the families of Pancho’s, Guadalupe’s, and others have made the four, five, and even six hour bus rides to meet their spouse and father in the airport terminal, Hector’s family is nowhere in sight. I make no mention of this. Instead, I ask him how long the bus ride from the airport to Toluca usually takes. For a moment, Hector looks a little bashful. “Nelson, hummm... We’re not going to Toluca. I have to talk with you about this, and I have to tell you that I have some secrets.”

Agusto, Julio, and Jose rejoin us before I have a chance to find out more. I give Hector a quizzical look, while he taps the side of his nose with his index finger and gives me a sly look– a sign to keep what he just said under wraps for the time being.

The others, with their newly printed connecting flight tickets in hand, make their good-byes with us. Agusto once more repeats that if I venture out to the Yucatan, I have to go and visit him and his family.

After they leave, Hector faces me, a grave look on his face. “I have to apologise to you...I have not been honest, and I have kept some secrets...I do not live in Toluca, but here... In Mexico City. But you will find out more, and why...I have much to tell you!” Hector’s serious visage is replaced with a broad smile as he picks up his large suitcase. We begin walking towards the nearby subway, as Hector explains his secrets.

Hector never actually lived in Toluca, but rather held an office job in Mexico City for ten years. Three years prior, he was fired for what he explained were unjust reasons. After struggling to find a similar job for nearly a year, and with various bills

accumulating, he took a low-paying job as a cabinet installer in a relative's contracting business. However, after working a year at this position, he was fired once again when business slowed down. He remained unemployed for several months. Around this time, his wife found out about the SAWP program from a friend. Together, they agreed that Hector taking part in the program for a year would bring in much needed funds – enough to pay off their rising debts and get the family on their feet again.

Hector continues his elaborate story as we enter the nearby Mexico City subway station and board a train.

The only problem was that the SAWP program only admits individuals from rural areas. So, Hector faked his permanent address, using that of an aunt who lived on the outskirts of Toluca, and fabricated a story of a life of rural work experience on the government applications to gain access to the program, a story which he maintained during his entire eight months in Canada, for fear of being discovered and expelled from the program.

I am flabbergasted by Hector's revelation, and by the present evidence which suggests that he is far more calculating and cunning than I had previously thought. He apologises for involving me in his intrigue, but insists that he was unable to take any risks while in Canada.

Hector motions that the next stop is ours. We exit the subway car, and exit the subterranean metro station, emerging in a residential area in the south-eastern side of the city. Hector explains that his wife is at work, and that we are going to pick up his two daughters from his sister-in-law's apartment. Additionally, he explains that he has a secret plan to surprise his wife and children – he has told them that his flight is scheduled

for November 30<sup>th</sup>, not November 29<sup>th</sup>, so they have no idea that he is coming home today.

We turn a corner, and Hector, very excitedly, motions at an apartment complex, identifying the second floor as his sister-in-law's residence. "Sammy and I have a signal - cover your ears, this might be loud for you!" Hector places the tips of his two little fingers into the corners of his mouth, and emits a shrill, loud whistle.

Almost immediately, the head of a young girl pops out of the open window of the apartment Hector identified.

"Papee?!" Samantha ecstatically yells towards us, a mixture of confusion, excitement, and joy in her voice. She disappears from the window.

Several seconds later, the ground-floor door of the apartment building swings open, and Samantha runs out towards her father, seizing him in a powerful embrace, almost bowling him over in the process.

"Papee!" Samantha cries out, and, in her excitement, begins sobbing emotional tears.

"Yes, Samantha, I'm here, I'm back!" Hector squeezes her, returning the hug, while I notice tears welling up in his eyes.

Meanwhile, I stand off to the side, feeling somewhat awkward and intrusive amid this significant display of affection and reunion.

Their embrace lasts several minutes. Once they've wiped away their tears, Samantha takes notice of me. Hector introduces me, and I ask them if I can take a picture of the reunited father and daughter. "Yes, please do!" Hector encourages me.





That evening, I sit in Hector's living room in his small apartment. He has rejoined his family, and introduced me to his wife and other young daughter, three-year-old Cynthia. After having given his family a brief recount of his time in Canada, he begins passing out presents. A necklace for his wife, a small stuffed toy for Cynthia. Then, he passes a familiar grey bundle to Samantha. She opens it, revealing a red plastic digital camera – the same one Hector used to share his experiences with her during his eight months in Canada.

## **Part 2: Several Days Later, with Durango Miguel**

I arrive in the city of Durango, the capital of the state which shares the same name, at noon. My former co-worker Durango has said that he will meet me inside the bus station terminal at 12:30 PM. From there, it is only a twenty-five minute drive to his

village. I sit down, and spend the waiting time going over the notes I had written during my previous several days with Hector-Alberto, and filling in the details I had remembered but failed to note down. At 1:00, I see Durango, wearing his characteristic fake snakeskin cowboy boots and matching belt, as he saunters into the bus station with a slender woman carrying a dirty-faced toddler in her arms.

He hurriedly introduces me to his wife, Maria, and his son, Carlito, before excusing himself brusquely and heading towards a nearby bathroom, leaving me to speak with his wife, who appears shy and avoids eye contact.

“You must be happy now that Dur...” I stop myself. My former co-worker’s name here isn’t Durango. Everyone here must know him as Miguel, “...now that Miguel is back, eh?”

She nods her head, and replies laconically, “Yes. Without him here, it is hard.”

Durango returns from the bathroom, and informs me that he bought a car yesterday, and that we have to take a taxi to a nearby town to retrieve it. I realise it will take me some time to get used to calling him Miguel. For me, he is still the man they called Durango. He further explains that he drove the car from his village to this nearby town, but, having never owned a car before, is not the best driver and didn’t want to risk taking his car into the city. Instead, he, his wife and child took a bus from the town to the bus station to meet me. He also reveals that his village is several hours away, not twenty-five minutes as he had previously stated. I feel disconcerted for having inconvenienced him and his wife with such a long trip to come and meet me.

We go outside to a taxi stand. Durango asks among a crowd of people if anyone is going in the same direction as us. He soon locates a father and daughter headed to the

same town where he has left his car who are willing to share a taxi (and the fare) with us. The six of us pile into the small taxi, with Durango insisting that I, as his guest, get the front seat. I'm a little unsure of how to handle the preferential treatment, but agree.

As we head out, the taxi driver comments to me, "You look like you have the face of a stranger." Durango, answering for me, explains how he was working in Canada and that I was one of his co-workers.

"Oh, is he your boss?" The taxi-driver asks.

Recalling our days on the staking team, I interject, "No, actually, he was more like my boss."

The other male passenger, who is curious about the SAWP program, asks Durango questions. Durango is eager to share his experiences, and the two begin discussing what it is like to work in Canada and the steps one needs to take to enter the SAWP program.

Over the course of the next several hours, we ride over dozens of bumpy kilometres in the crowded taxi, retrieve Durango's newly purchased 1996 Toyota Corolla, and complete the additional four-hour ride in his car to his village.

The sun is setting by the time we enter his village, and the small concrete houses lining the dirt streets are quickly becoming covered with shadows.

Durango briefly shows me around his small home, and asks me if I want to take a shower. A day spent in transit has left me feeling grimy, so I readily accept.

"OK, come on then, we're going to my mothers'", Durango informs me.

He and I enter his car once more, as he explains that his mother's house is one of the few in the village with a shower and running water, a luxury made available as a consequence of his recently deceased father's successful ranching operation.

We drive over the bumps and ridges of the rugged streets to the opposite side of the village, and park the car next to Durango's mother's compound. His mother's house is made up of several small concrete buildings lining an outdoor dirt pathway which leads to the kitchen building.

Durango knocks on the door of the first concrete building, and a female voice calls from within. We enter the modest room, where an elderly lady is lying on the bed, while two men who look remarkably similar to Durango are sitting on nearby folding chairs. A small pan is in the centre of the room, filled with hot coals from the kitchen's stove to ward off the night's cold. The three of them are watching a DVD of country music videos on a small television.

Durango introduces me to his two brothers, one who had returned a month ago from southern Ontario, also as a member of the SAWP. We talk briefly, while one of Durango's brothers asks me if I was his employer in Canada. Durango's mother lifts herself out of bed, and invites us into the kitchen.

Once there, she offers me some coffee, as she pours some hot water into a mug from a kettle that had been resting on top of the wood stove in the corner of the kitchen. Meanwhile, Durango has gone outside to start a fire under the shower's water tank so that I may have warm water for my washing.

We sit at the kitchen table, and Durango's mother offers me some sweet bread to eat with my instant coffee. Durango returns from outside, letting me know that the water heater should be warm enough in about half-an-hour.

Durango fetches himself a mug of coffee and sweet bread, and sits himself at the other end of the kitchen table.

"So, you are Miguel's friend?" his mother poses me a straightforward question.

"Oh, yes. Your son helped me out a lot on the farm." I inform her, "You have a good son."

She nods. "Yes. I have nine sons... All of them are good men...There were twelve, but three of them died. Nine, and all boys... Men now. And they have all turned out well, not one of them was difficult, or turned out bad."

I try to put on a warm smile, despite the fact that I'm exhausted from my day's travel, and attempt to compliment her, "Well, it must be because they had a good mother."

Durango adds to my comment, "...and a good father."

His mother's eyes glaze over slightly, and she momentarily stares off into space. With sadness in her voice, she exclaims, more to herself than to us, "He was a good father...A good worker...A good husband. Good in everything."

I believe I see tears welling up in her eyes. It has been only a little more than a year since Durango's father died of complications related to his diabetes, and a loss that apparently weighs heavily on the family still. A moment of silence follows.

Eventually, Durango changes the conversation towards a more upbeat subject, asking his mother how many calves were born to her herd while he was in Canada.

Later on, after I've showered and thanked Durango's mother for her hospitality, Durango and I leave her compound, and drive off.

As he navigates the rugged road, Durango tells me, "My mom, she still is finding it difficult without my father...She's only 55 years old, but his death, well...it's aged her a lot."

We park the car next to Durango's house, and I help him cover it with several old blankets – Durango doesn't want the night's frost to damage his new acquisition.

Before we go inside, he points to a steep hill nearby which juts out of the surrounding flat landscape dramatically. Smiling, he tells me, "That hill, when you climb to the top, you can see everything from up there. The whole village, the river, the grazing lands. All of it." He continues to look at the massive silhouette. "Tomorrow morning, we will climb it, and I'll show you my herd from up there. Would you like that?"

"Yeah. Yeah, I would like that," I reply.

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